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THE BRIDE WORE BLACK

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By

JOHN DRUMMOND

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NOTE

All the characters in this book are fictitious and have no relation to any living persons.

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YOU READ THIS FIRST

I WAS once taken to a Symphony Concert. During the interval I picked up a programme from off the floor. It contained descriptive notes of the work I had just listened to. Would you believe it, there had been waterfalls, a forest fire and the noise of pines in spring, and I had sat there for half an hour thinking the conductor was trying to show us how many different noises his band could make. Wasn't I sick missing those waterfalls and especially the noise of the pines in spring! The moral is, if you're trying to be clever, tell the audience what you are aiming to do, or they will just think you crackers.

This book then, sets out to trace the great change that has taken place in this country during the last few years. To try to make you live through this change the style of the book alters with the changing tempo. At first you may find it slow and stodgy. Many of the thoughts and actions, even phrases, of 1939 have slipped away into the salvage dumps; to meet them again is similar in experience to a man discovering that he is sitting next to Henry I in a bus. In order to get the atmosphere the story has to be interrupted by occasional patches of colour, and characters have to be drawn to represent groups of people rather than isolated types. I have not thought it necessary to announce that the incidents, characters, etc. are entirely fictitious, because the whole book is obviously a blended patchwork of a pageant which we have seen enacted before our eyes—the changing of romance to reality, and this can only be symbolised by puppets and shadows.

I must express my gratitude to Brian Gore-Booth, who encouraged me to take liberties with Shakespeare's perfect English. Unfortunately, he will never read this book in its completed form, as he has already given his life in this war for the ideals we all feel but cannot express.

CYCLE ONE

OVERTURE AND BEGINNERS

1

SATURDAY, APRIL 29TH, 1939

"No, of course I don't mind."

'Mind!' Orina thought. 'Nearly tearing my silver dress off, great clodhopping oaf!'

Crash! A pink-coated monster nearly knocked her flat.

'I wish,' she reflected, 'I hadn't come back for the other dances, there's such a scrum round the door, one can hardly breathe. Anyway, what's the use now. . . . If I'm around and he doesn't turn up that lets me out.'

She held up her programme so that the scrawling pencil-marks were illumined by the bluish light that filtered through a Chinese lantern draped over the Town Hall's austere electric fitting. Here it was: Dance 14, Fox-trot, 'Baldy'. What *was* his proper name?

The crowd at the door was thinning. Those who had found their partners took the floor. Orina saw out of the corner of her brilliant blue eyes a girl she vaguely knew, rather bunchy in off-white, sneaking away towards the cloakroom—Dorothy something. Obviously no partner. 'Perhaps I could wish Baldy on her,' she speculated, but at that moment a thin, pink-coated figure with a semi-hairless scalp touched her on the shoulder.

"I was afraid you would not turn up," he muttered.

Orina turned quickly and gave him a dazzling, provocative smile.

"It's very good of you to dance with me at all. I am sure you would rather be . . ."

Orina had been thinking of Dennis's dark tanned face in the parked car as she spoke and had uttered the words at random, but she realised they had not been well chosen. If she finished her remark by saying 'you would rather be

eating supper' it looked as though she thought him greedy. So, instead of finishing the sentence, she slipped her wax-white arm through his and led him towards the ballroom.

"Shall we?"

Orina smiled as they started. Surely Baldy must be a nearly extinct type, few people held girls at arm's length for a fox-trot. His hand behind her back was uncomfortable, too high for support and without any guiding grip.

'I must say something to start him off. After that I can think about Dennis.'

"Nearly May," she stated. "Rather late for a hunt ball."

"We considered the date very carefully. I'm on the Committee," Baldy rejoined.

'I ought to have known he was on the Committee.'

"Of course I like it that way—it spins the hunt ball season out more. Do you like the tune? It's quite new—comes out of a film *All Down the Street.*"

Her partner endeavoured to hum a few bars, but gave it up. "It's too swingy for me," he declared.

"Sweet words," Orina asserted, and sang, "Throw your luck over your shoulder, march with the down-and-outs, Tiddly om pom pom tiddly om pom pom bang pom tiddly om pom pom."

"I see," her companion said. "That frightful noise the band makes imitates unemployed beating on tin cans."

"Yes," she answered with a sudden weariness. "It's supposed to be the march of the down-and-outs, and the band imitate—combs with paper over them, spoons, tin cans and things."

"I think it's silly," Baldy said.

"Well," Orina replied, "it takes one's mind off things. It's new and gay, don't you think?"

She didn't listen to what he thought, she had suddenly felt tired and the fun had gone out of her like a pricked balloon.

They stood while the crowd clapped loudly—it was a popular number.

"Would you like to sit out or shall we go on?"

'Struggle on,' she thought to herself, 'better to struggle on when the party is dying on you. Better to keep moving.'

Yes, shuffling round the room would be best. Sitting in

that long draughty passage discussing platitudes would finish her for good.

The band was off again. She decided to make a desperate effort to get him on some subject so she could have a moment to think things over before seeing Dennis again.

"I work in London now, you know, selling hats. I do want to hear what sort of season you have had at home. Tell me about it."

Thank goodness he had swallowed the bait at last. Like a patient going off under anaesthetic she heard him saying—it sounded very far off—"I have had very bad luck with my horses. I bought two in Ireland . . ."

Orina's mind flew back to the parked car, to Dennis's sleek hair—it smelt rather nice, but his moustache had tickled as he kissed her. She analysed the emotion. Somehow she was a little disappointed—he was so good-looking a girl would naturally expect more thrill. She felt she shouldn't have been acutely conscious of the gear lever sticking into her leg all the time. Still, she had promised to marry him.

'I have been rather silly to have been so fussy about kissing. It really hasn't been worth stinting myself twenty-three years to be tickled by a moustache with a gear lever pressed tight against one's suspender. I shall be black and blue to-morrow I expect——'

"Don't you think so?" Baldy asked her.

'Now,' thought Orina, 'what on earth am I supposed to think?'

He had brought her out of the anaesthetic with a jump. She looked round and noticed the dancers had thinned out considerably. They now seemed able to do their weird prancing without having to apologise every few minutes. The chorus was beginning again.

She smiled at him. "Sing it with me—Throw your luck over your shoulder, march with the down-and-outs, Tiddly om pom pom tiddly om pom bang pom tiddly om pom pom."

"Thank you so much," Orina smiled, shepherding him towards the crêpe paper-covered exit.

"Not at all, my dear young lady. Dancing with the most beautiful girl——"

She cut him short, wearily arch, "I expect you say that to all the girls."

Dennis was standing in the doorway. 'Of course,' Orina thought, 'he is simply heaven to look at.'

"Do you mind frightfully if I join my party? I shouldn't have danced out of it really."

"Of course not."

Orina noticed that her remark had wounded her companion. She hated hurting people, and added hastily, "I mean after we have sat out."

She saw him straighten. He was relieved. It would have hurt his vanity if this beautiful silver creature had got bored with him. He knew, with his years of wisdom, that her eyes were glued on the bronzed figure in the doorway and that it was only a gesture of kindliness on her part, but he held her to it.

As they swept past Dennis, Orina gave the slightest gesture, raising upwards her thin tapered fingers. 'I'll be along in a minute. Wait for me,' she signalled. But as she passed, her quick eyes noted the puzzled look on Dennis's face. He had not grasped her meaning, but he smiled.

They turned into the draughty corridor where benches were arranged, covered in red bunting. Baldy stood erect, waiting for her to sit down.

"One sec—my bag—I parked it before we danced."

"Please let me get it."

"No, thanks, you would never find it."

She ran off round the corner. Dennis leant against the wall, smoking a cigarette.

"Wait for me, darling—he'd be hurt if I didn't finish off the dance."

"O.K., sweet."

She recovered her bag from a jumble of bags and unused programmes on a table at the entrance and sped back to her partner. Orina told herself, 'Pull yourself together, old girl, you have been frightfully rude. Be alive—entertaining. He might be useful one day.'

She could not help noticing white hairs growing out of her partner's ears. Orina averted her eyes lest he saw and read their aversion.

"It's very good of you dancing with an old fogey like me."

"Oh no, you're not old—besides, older men are so much more interesting."

"I was fifty-four on March 20th."

"We must both be born under the same sign. I am Pisces—April the third—I was twenty-three."

She knew her conversation was getting stilted and searched her mind for a stock of polite talk she had tucked away somewhere.

"I see Southampton won the cup. Are you interested in football?"

"I am afraid not. We played rugger at school and I've never followed soccer very closely."

He paused and listened to the band which had started the next dance. Orina had heard it too but determined not to be the first to move. She looked at him steadfastly with a rapt, interested look, the outcome of many similar ordeals in the past. His pink coat smelt strongly of camphor. She thought, 'There can't be any flies on him.'

Baldy's next remark came as such a surprise that Orina waited, not sure whether he had really said it or some wisp of imagination had made her think it.

Yes, he had said it. He was waiting for a reply.

She searched vaguely for a non-committal statement. To ask her suddenly like this to become a matrimonial agent—it was shattering, rather sad in a way.

"I am desperately lonely," he had told her, "that's why I bore people at these dances. I am quite comfortably off and if you ever meet a girl who would marry an old fossil—well, you know where to find one."

He looked straight in front of him. Perhaps, after all, she had imagined it. No, the words rang clear. He had said it. But what did it mean? She must say something.

"I won't forget," Orina murmured, examining her finger-nails.

"Thanks. It's the next dance. Shall we be moving?"

As they walked along the strip of reddish cigarette-burnt carpet Orina thought, 'I've been asked to do most things, but this beats everything. He may have had some fall

hunting—something pressing on the brain makes him go queer suddenly. Who cares anyway—here is Dennis.'

Dennis took Orina by the back of the arm and shepherded her towards the buffet.

"I want you to meet my mother."

She halted before a full-length mirror in the corridor and straightened her shiny silver dress. 'Mrs. Pask is frightfully smart, I must look my best.' She pulled a broken petal off one of her orchids.

"Dennis, darling, you can still get out of it if you like."

He gave her arm a squeeze.

"You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and I don't deserve my luck. Get out of it! I've . . . ." He stopped as some people passed close to them and then continued low and emotionally, "I never thought you would take me. I had asked you so often it was just getting into a formula with me. I nearly fell through the floor when you accepted me. I don't yet know why you did."

She looked at his spaniel eyes before replying, and then shrugged her creamy shoulders.

"I am a spinster and I'm getting old," she answered in a dead voice. "Come on, do I smell of camphor?"

"Camphor?" Dennis queried, puzzled.

"My last partner did and I can't smell anything else."

They passed between the babbling groups to where Mrs. Pask stood talking to a beautiful young man. Orina's first impression of her future mother-in-law was that she had suddenly found again a doll of her childhood, a very favourite doll her mother had brought her from Paris; it had the same hawky features with apricot blobs of colour on each cheek. 'I should like to turn her over and see if she has all those beautifully worked petticoats my doll had.'

"My dear, Dennis has been telling me all about you. Isn't it exciting? Do you know Lord Asker?"

The immaculate man turned towards her. His tired face lighted when he saw the silver vision.

"I've admired from afar—I have seen you racing. Were you at Hurst this afternoon?"

"Yes," from Orina shortly, it was a sore subject, and she

turned back to Dennis's mother. "I hope I will be a success, Mrs. Pask."

'Why did I say that?' Orina wondered. 'It's so silly, especially to a smart woman like her. It sounds as if she had engaged me as housemaid. A bad start. Now she knows I am frightened of her.'

"My darling girl, but how lovely you are, how clever of my stupid boy to find you," Mrs. Pask gushed, pleased that she had at once vanquished this dazzling Venus, and then in a flood, "Darling, you must call me Constance. It's rather a dull name, but the contraction, Connie, is worse."

Dennis handed her a glass of champagne. She sipped from it hastily. She did not know how to answer his mother. Somehow it seemed impossible to call Mrs. Pask Constance.

"You go racing a lot?"

"Oh, only the meetings round London. I work there. Hats. I live with a friend of mine—Betty Trent. We share a flat."

Orina stopped. 'Why did I blurt all that out? I might as well have said I like Saturdays off and I'm used to doing a little plain cooking when the Cook's out. These sort of women are beyond me. I wish Dennis would do something to help me out.'

But his mother continued in her carefully modulated society voice, "I shall organise a little family dinner—Sunday night—can you come? Don't change—just cold beef and beastliness."

"Yes rather, I should love to. Thanks awfully."

'I've gone back to my schooldays,' Orina reflected. 'I should have added, "It will be Jolly D."'

Mrs. Pask smiled casually and moved off with the beautifully tailored peer, who appeared to appreciate her. Dennis looked after them. "Isn't he a lovely boy? But he's a friend of Lord Peter's so he must be tough at heart."

The buffet table, with its little dishes of oddments, had become reduced to sardines and cut-up fragments of chicken—Baldy's favourite dishes and specially chosen by him against all opposition from the other members of the catering committee. Dennis took a piece of chicken and ate it quickly, his strong teeth tearing away the flesh.

"Umph," Dennis spoke with his mouth full, and extracting the wishing-bone he held it out to her, his finger crooked round one side.

They pulled and the larger portion came to Orina.

"Now wish," Dennis told her.

Orina lowered her eyelids with their fringe of long black lashes and traced with the bone a cabalistic design in the air.

"I know what you have wished for," Dennis asserted, looking at her enquiringly. "You wished——" he checked himself. He had been going to say "for a wonderful married life", and then thought it sounded rather conceited, so he said rather lamely, "To win the Irish Sweep."

"Not exactly," Orina answered, and her voice had suddenly gone dead and lifeless. "I wished for some money to pay for this blasted dress."

Dennis turned away from her, gulped down the whisky and soda he had been holding, then turning back and smiling wistfully, he threw the other half of the chicken bone over his shoulder and sang in a not unmusical boyish baritone, "Throw your luck over your shoulder, march with the down-and-outs. . . ."

2

SUNDAY, APRIL 30TH

THE butler opened the door—the house was large and forbidding. She had expected Dennis would have come down to meet her and stolen a kiss before they went up to the drawing-room.

They had reached the top of the stairs. The butler opened a large plaster-decorated door. He murmured smoothly, "Mr. Whyte is here—Mrs. Pask will be down in a moment."

'Who is Mr. Whyte?' Orina wondered. 'If I'd known they were going to be late I could have borrowed an iron and worn my black.'

"My name's Whyte," the tall, clean-shaven man informed her. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

"I'm Orina Flers—you may have heard of me from Mrs. Pask."

She looked at his face. He was rather attractive without being good-looking. She saw by his expression that he hadn't heard about her before.

"Pleased to meet you," he said, smiling.

Her mind, in its vague search to find out what type of man this Whyte was, halted at the expression, 'Pleased to meet you', then she saw in his face he had said it as a joke and she countered by saying "Proud to know you, Mr. Whyte."

She felt rather than saw his eyes run over her, noting and appraising her body, and the make and texture of her dress. She glanced up. Whyte looked away guiltily as if he had been caught taking change from a church plate.

"Do I pass?" Orina enquired gravely.

Whyte had walked towards the fireplace and lit a cigarette as he spoke.

"No, I can't flaw you—good legs and feet. Just your lipstick. It's a pity to use that rather extreme shade when you're so pretty. I thought it was probably meant to match something but I can't find out what."

She laughed suddenly and quickly. She liked this Whyte; you knew where you were with him. Besides, he was right.

As she hadn't answered Whyte continued, "Constance is always late. The idea of this cold, help-yourself dinner Sunday night is good; it should give the servants a rest, but actually it is so late, and everybody makes so much mess helping themselves, it really gives them much more work. Do you know Dennis?"

"Slightly," Orina answered. "I'm going to marry him."

"Lucky boy," Whyte remarked casually, and without conviction. "In that case you must call me Stephen."

"Why?" she queried.

"Partly because it's my name, but mostly because I'm an old friend of the family."

"Well, Stephen, do you know them well enough to give me a glass of sherry?"

Stephen walked over to the tray and poured out two glasses of Tio Pepè.

Orina took one. "Thank you, Cousin Stephen. Gosh! it's dry."

The butler entered.

"Mrs. Pask is very sorry but she is not feeling at all well and can't come down to dinner. She hopes you will start. Mr. Dennis will be in any moment."

"Would you tell Mrs. Pask how sorry I am," Orina requested.

Stephen waited till the door was shut and then remarked, "It's slimming, I expect. These women buy a dress and then starve themselves to get into it. Shall we eat?"

Mrs. Pask was propped up in bed by numerous pillows. She had finished her rather curious dinner, a glass of Burgundy, two Ryvita biscuits and some raw carrots. It formed all she could remember of a long and complicated diet a new doctor had ordered her.

She picked up a small hand mirror and glanced at her face. It looked worn and tired. The constant massaging of the wrinkles round her eyes and mouth had merely formed new ones on the sides of her face.

Her head ached and her starved, contracted stomach hurt her when she coughed. "I suppose I caught a chill at that frightful dance," she diagnosed. "After all my work, and then not asked."

Yes, she had to face it. It was Waterloo. A desperate blow. For years she had quoted the Duchess as one of her best friends—"Ella has asked me to find young men for her dance", "Ella and I are going for a rest motoring", Ella this and Ella that. And now she was having the greatest luncheon party of the season and had deliberately left her, Constance, out of it. Four crowned heads at one table—some 'ex' admittedly. A small intimate lunch party and she, Constance the faithful, who had been Ella's footstool and abject slave for all these years, had been left out. Of course it was a long time ahead, just over a month. There might be some way she could get out with face. Her friends had not got an inkling of it yet. There was time to concoct some way of leaving London till the dreaded lunch was over. Just over a month. She would think it over.

Her mind switched to her next worry. Her wretched

chauffeur, Holman, had smashed up her big Packard—just before the dance. He was quite the best man she had ever had, with a wonderful knack of finding her after parties and the theatre. Besides, she liked the man personally. She had twice advanced him money to help his marriage along.

Mrs. Pask threw away two of the supporting pillows and lay wearily down. But her worries pressed on her again and she decided to go on with the endless biography she was reading. She stretched out her tired hand and took up the large volume, *Discoverer Drake*. Her mind became soothed as she read a problematically authentic account of Queen Elizabeth's underclothes.

"Can you work this goldfish bowl business?" Stephen enquired.

Orina lit the spirit lamp and poured the coffee into the container.

"I served my apprenticeship at it at home. My mother always forgets something, and my father is usually so upset about what they have said on the County Council he can't be trusted to touch anything without breaking it."

"I am sorry Dennis couldn't get leave. They're tightening things up more in the Army now and he has had a lot lately."

Orina knew he was trying to make excuses for Dennis and it annoyed her, for she had known by Dennis's voice on the telephone how sorry he was not to get away.

"I wouldn't worry to make excuses," she replied in a careful, casual voice. "I think he would have got away if he could. He likes me, you know."

Stephen did not answer and Orina wished she had not snubbed him. His remarks had been kindly meant but they implied that Stephen knew Dennis *could* have got away. Possibly he knew more about Dennis than she did.

Now she came to think of it, Dennis himself had told her something about a girl friend of his. It was a form of shyness, she supposed, but boys always seemed to be telling her about other girls, couldn't face up to the matter in hand. That was one thing about Stephen. He might keep fifty women but nobody would ever know.

"When does this wonder horse of yours run?" she asked him. "I could do with a winner."

"Ally Pally, May 15th. I'll drive you there if you like. Dennis will have leave by that time. We could all go out somewhere afterwards."

Orina reflected a moment. If it really was a good two-year-old and hadn't been out before, she might get twenty to one on it. Stephen seemed to have some sense about racing.

"Yes," she answered. "I would love to come. It's a Monday, but I can fix my shop—they're not very fussy about a day or so here and there."

"Right," Stephen replied. He was a man of action and made decisions quickly and definitely. "I'll be at Giuseppe's at one o'clock Monday, 15th May."

Dennis took a couple of gulps from his double whisky. He felt better, and walked to the window. He looked out over the barrack square faintly illumined by the light of the young moon, then drained the glass and put it back on the iron washstand, replaced his toothbrush in it, and arranged the tube beside in the orderly manner his servant had left them. He didn't want the man to know he had been having 'quick ones' in the middle of the night. He sat on the edge of the bed and shivered slightly. His good-looking face was drawn.

"There seems no reason why I shouldn't be happy," he meditated, running his hand across the dark stubble on his chin. "Let's see how I can get out. It's no use worrying this way. A little thought and commonsense and I'm clear of troubles.

"First there's the Cheltenham losses. Well, the bookies have been very decent and I've worked them off a good bit now." He figured for a little. "I'll get Mum to guarantee me at the Bank and get them finished off.

"Then there's Babe. To Hell with Babe. If I'd only known Orina was going to accept me there never would have been a Babe. What the Hell shall I do about her?"

Dennis was frightened of women and the breaking off of the Babe affair presented difficulties from every angle he looked at it.

"In a way Babe's a decent scout. Of course, not the same class as Orina, just a plater—but still we have had a lot of fun."

He reflected over their various adventures since they had met in the Skiing Hotel at the beginning of the year.

"Of course Babe's rough," Dennis murmured aloud, and then he laughed. "Not exactly Society nor very beautiful, but still you know where you are with Babe. Orina now, what sort of girl is she? Frightfully pretty. Yes, without a doubt, top of the Handicap—could have married anybody. Why on earth did she accept me like that?"

Now he came to think of it he'd only asked her out of habit and because he wanted to kiss her. He supposed he was a bit tight at the time. For all her loveliness she hadn't been much fun to kiss.

"Own up, old boy, you were scared stiff when you kissed her. Why on earth did she accept me?" he said again. "Probably pique. She's been aiming much higher and it hasn't come off. Well, what was it she said there in the passage—'I'm old and I'm a spinster or something'."

He began to shiver. "Hell!" he said again, for no reason, and got back into bed. The sheets were cool and he stretched his legs out luxuriously. Then he remembered Orina's remark about her dress not being paid for.

'I'll lend her the money,' he thought. 'That will equal us up a bit—put me in a stronger position. I shan't be so scared of her.'

For a few seconds the warm glow of the whisky and his new resolve fortified him, then his mind flew back to Babe and his overdraft, and he fell into an uneasy sleep.

3

TUESDAY, MAY 2ND

BETTY lay on the small sofa of their flat skipping through a detective novel.

"Aren't you going out?" Orina enquired. She had walked in from the bathroom and now pulled off her rubber cap, shook out her reddish-gold hair.

"No," Betty replied, throwing the book away from her. "Is Joyce about?"

"I didn't know you wanted her. I let her have a night off."

"She's never here," Betty said petulantly.

Orina seated herself on the arm of the sofa.

"It's my fault, but she took off the electric iron the other night. I gave her socks. Of course she had to wail like a tree frog. Her young man is scaring the life out of her—he's gone all rough—so I didn't consider she would be much good around. I gave her one-and-three to go to the pictures."

"You're always helping everybody," Betty snapped morosely, "but nobody helps me."

Orina looked thoughtfully at the girl on the sofa—Betty never seemed to get rid of that squashy schoolgirl figure—then she enquired:

"What's the trouble? You looked a bit grim to-day in the shop."

Betty did not answer. She sat up and started to twist and untwist the tassel of the sofa cushion.

Orina waited for a few seconds and then asked anxiously, "Not ill or anything?"

Betty gazed at the fawn carpet before answering. Orina often thought to herself, 'I can hear that girl's mind creak.'

Betty said at length, "Do you call having a baby being ill? Because if that's ill, then I'm ill."

Orina, before the full shock of this announcement had filtered into her brain, reflected, 'Only Betty could have made up such a terrible sentence.'

"You sure?" she asked at length.

"Practically sure. I haven't been sick yet."

Orina rose from the arm of the sofa and walked to their mutual desk. She studied Betty's diary a moment and then returned.

"You can't be absolutely certain, can you?"

Betty sat still, staring at the carpet. "It all fits in," she said.

"Well, of all the ginks! Why didn't you tell me? You have never kept anything back before."

"I couldn't," Betty declared vehemently. "I know you think me a frightful idiot. I got sort of tight and worked up

and felt pretty good. It happened the week-end I spent with the Hartons. At a dance—we sat out all over the house. Orina, if I get out of this I'll never look at another man as long as I live."

"Surely," Orina replied, choosing her words with care, "it wouldn't be too late to get married."

"Of course it wouldn't," Betty replied in an exaggeratedly tragic tone of voice, "but he's sort of married already."

For no particular reason before Orina's mind came a picture of Stephen. She wondered if he was married.

"Couldn't he get a divorce or something and make an honest woman of you?"

"Oh no, it wouldn't be possible, though he loves me. As a matter of fact you know him. He——"

"Don't tell me," Orina interrupted sharply. "I don't want to know who he is. He . . . Oh, if it's somebody I'm going to meet a lot it would worry me. I'd much rather not know."

"Oh God," Betty groaned, "I'm going to kill myself. It's so frightful. I've been such an idiot. It was just a moment of utter madness."

Orina knew Betty enjoyed in a peculiarly morbid way her misery. Poor Betty. She had never been a great success either at school or in Society, and although she was now bitterly worried, at the same time it gave her a position of interest that she had never held before.

"Yes," she said again, "I shall kill myself." But this time she said it quietly as one might say, 'I am going to go skating this afternoon.'

Orina walked towards her bedroom.

"You aren't going to leave me?" Betty cried after her.

"Of course not," Orina replied, turning in the doorway. "You go and have a wash up. I'll ring and say I can't go. I'll get another girl for them to make up their bridge four." She considered a moment. "Pamela—she told me in the shop she wasn't going out—then Betty, you and I will go to the Old Vic. I haven't seen any Shakespeare since we acted *The Merchant of Venice* at school. Do you remember how good you were as Shylock—it's a pity you didn't stick

to it, you could have been a *great* character actress." Orina knew when to butter the bread.

"Yes, it would be fun. I'll wash." Betty's voice sounded happier.

Orina walked into her bedroom. The cupboard door was open; it would never stay shut. She kicked it with her foot but it flew back open. She looked at dresses hanging inside, then closed the door very slowly and deliberately, but before she reached the telephone it had quietly opened again. Orina laughed. Little things amused her. She dialled the number with one hand and slung the Directory at it with the other.

"That will teach you to shut up. . . . No, sorry, not you," she added, laughing down the receiver.

4

WEDNESDAY, MAY 3RD

STEPHEN WHYTE looked morosely out of the taxi window. They seemed to be held up in one of those annoying evening traffic blocks.

Stephen was worried. He had been in a state of nervous worry for years, but now his troubles had reached a stage when at times they became unbearable. 'Why should I worry?' he thought. 'I am rich and prosperous', but then the vision of those Red Mountain ordinary struck into his brain. The information was good enough: the mining engineer had been certain of the rich deposits, the company was soundly run by experienced experts in the mineral field. He had got in on the ground floor. It seemed too easy. He was sitting with two hundred thousand pounds' worth of shares when the first report came out: a good, sound, not boastfully confident report. There was just one clause which seemed to worry the public. The slight, very slight doubt expressed in the legal report about the validity of the royalty agreement with the Valupez government. But the doubt had been sufficient to hold the buyers off. The shares had dropped a point or two—nothing serious, disappointing but not alarming, Stephen considered, weighing carefully the alternatives. He had sent a man out to go into the position,

a sound, practical fellow who had delved deeply and had at length cabled "Valupez government sound in favour of British interests." Well, that was good enough; they were not likely to repudiate the royalty agreement. Stephen had taken what seemed at the time the perfectly logical step of boosting the shares; he had bought another two hundred thousand and there had been a distinct improvement. It was at this point he told himself he should have started to sell.

The taxi moved forward with a jerk.

Well, he hadn't sold—in fact had boosted them again. Yes, that was silly. Still, there you were, life was silly—money—the whole thing. After all it might be worse. The company was going on all right, they had big difficulties to overcome. Valupez was a rocky, impenetrable country—it would take time. No reason to get alarmed.

He looked at the wet streets as the cab jogged along. Dinner at the club and bridge afterwards. 'I'll enjoy myself and forget it.'

As Stephen walked through the hall he deliberately avoided looking at the tape machine. He took off his coat and washed. He felt pleasantly hungry. Swirling his hands about in the warm water he remembered he had not had lunch. Breakfast he had given up long ago. It had been a busy day.

Rubbing his hands vigorously with the towel, he saw Sir Charles Porch doing exactly the same thing. Shrewd chap, Porch.

"We might dine together."

"Yes, let's," Porch said.

They threw their towels into the basket and walked into the smoking-room.

"Apéritif?" Stephen enquired.

"Thanks. I'll have a dry Martini."

"So will I. Two dry Martinis. How's Parliament?" Stephen asked amiably.

Sir Charles leant back in his chair and rested the tips of his fingers together, considering the matter. He was a successful barrister besides being a politician and did not answer questions at random. He spoke at length with that clear, logical diction of the Law.

"It is impossible for any one man to give even an approximately accurate view on any subject to-day. We live in an age of specialists, and, mark you, specialists who, the field being so vast, cannot possibly be expected to know more than a twentieth part of their subject."

Stephen slid a coin on to the salver and took the glass, ice-cold to the touch. He sipped and felt better.

Sir Charles tasted the concoction carefully. He was a connoisseur of everything one could eat or drink. He set it down and continued.

"So any view which I may pronounce must not be taken in any way as authoritative or conclusive on the subject."

Stephen popped the olive into his mouth. He liked listening to Porch; the careful way he said things and the rich, musical quality of his voice was soothing after a difficult day.

"In my opinion, therefore, the country is in the position of a large, beautifully appointed liner—one of those floating palaces that cross the Atlantic."

Stephen rather liked the idea of everybody being nice and snug on a palatial liner and he grunted assent as he turned the olive stone over in his mouth.

"But unlike these liners, which have a definite purpose in conveying passengers and freight from one port to another, we, the country, have no purpose, no harbour for which we are steering. We are wandering about, far out in the centre of the ocean, burning away our precious fuel, eating up our valuable food, without any destination in view, without compass to find it if we had. And from this stage we must inevitably reach a stage when the food is all eaten, the fuel all consumed, and we are left at the mercy of the currents drifting among the treacherous ice-floes."

Stephen did not care much for this depressing forecast of the history of the British Isles and he suggested they should get some dinner.

The subdued light and bedrock atmosphere of the club dining-room reassured Stephen.

They ordered, after due consultation, a bottle of delicate white wine and a satisfying repast of smoked trout, baby chicken, asparagus, new potatoes, and a special savoury of

Sir Charles' made of anchovy, prawn, and quantities of various spices.

Sir Charles sipped his wine reflectively. Stephen smiled. 'This stuff,' he thought, 'is all part of some speech Charles is going to spring on his constituents, he is trying it out on me first.'

Porch continued. "I will elucidate my meaning.

"You are doubtless familiar with the enormous increase in tobacco sales, the almost incredible numbers of people who attend places of entertainments such as picture palaces, the phenomenal growth of football pools, gambling in general and the sales of sensational forms of fiction. You follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"Dope! There is no other word more expressive. These millions of people who do these things I have enumerated and more which we need not discuss, are taking them as a narcotic to drown or soften their sorrows. One can therefore, I think, quite logically assume that as so many people do these things they must have one general sorrow or grievance they are trying to forget."

Porch sat back in his chair and passed his hand quickly across his face, a characteristic gesture of his. Then he leant towards Stephen and pointed a thin finger at him.

"What is that trouble that drives people to all these things?"

Stephen did not know whether he was supposed to answer, or whether it was all part of the speech, but he ventured an observation.

"It's funny you saying that. I have been worrying myself. I thought the cause might be lack of security."

Sir Charles continued, ignoring Stephen's remark, "Have you not read how towards the end of the Roman Empire the whole population had turned into a dope-loving, excitement-seeking race? How the gladiatorial combats got wilder and wilder orgies of sacrificial blood?"

"Sacrificial?" Stephen queried.

"Assuredly sacrifice to the god dope."

"Well," said Stephen, interested in the argument, "what was biting them?"

"Nothing much. They had a religion, a beautiful pure religion built up round the mysterious elements of nature, the sun and moon and the silver stars in the velvet heavens and—— What is it you racing people say when a horse loses? There is some apt word you use."

"Unstuck," Stephen supplied.

"Well, this beautiful religion of the Romans had come unstuck, they were searching for something else out in the interim. They collapsed, were swept away by the barbarians. Were scattered like leaves in the wind."

"You mean we, to-day, are looking for a new revelation?"

Sir Charles swept his hand across his face and shot out the same accusing finger.

"Why look for a new revelation," he said vehemently, "when nobody has tried the last?"

5

MONDAY, MAY 15TH

ORINA, Stephen and Dennis walked across the road from the course. They had eaten an excellent lunch, backed a winner, and the world seemed a jolly and amusing place to live in. Orina actually had backed two winners and she stuffed three crisp one-pound notes into her bag as she walked.

"It's my lucky course," said Stephen as they threaded their way along the cinder track that led to the stables. "I think Isles of Foam is home and dried to-day."

Dennis was ticking the numbers off.

"Four down to eight, ten to seventeen, nineteen, twenty and twenty-one. There's plenty of them. They will make this thing. Gordon rides favourite Brown Bread Colt. I saw it go at Newbury—it's useful."

"So is mine," Stephen confidently replied.

They were now moving along the row of saddling stalls. A small, cheery little man joined them.

"My trainer—Captain Hoof," Stephen remarked. "This is Miss Flers and Mr. Pask."

The small jolly man raised his hat in greeting.

"Your little lady's all right, she travelled well. A bit

excited." He turned to Orina. "Like a girl at her first dance."

Stephen glanced at Orina but she didn't look like a girl at all. Rather like a boy, he thought. All her girlish curves had disappeared and she seemed now composed of strong straight lines. Her face was radiant, and his trainer disregarded the others, so great was her magnetism, confined his remarks to her.

They were now standing by the filly, a trembling nervous creature of glistening hair and elastic muscle. The little man pulled off the rugs and placed the number cloth pad and saddle on her back with amazing speed and deftness. He was tightening the girths as he remarked over his shoulder to Orina, "This girl's one out of the bag, but the track won't suit her—tie herself up in knots here. But there you are, owners must have their way."

Stephen looked uncomfortable, like a man who against all advice has entered a pomeranian in a greyhound race.

The filly raised her off hind hoof half-minded to strike out, but instead she moved it backwards and forwards in piston-like motions. Orina looked at the small hoof shod with the lightest aluminium shoe. She knew exactly how the filly felt—she had felt exactly the same when waiting before running in a hundred yards sprint at school.

The little jolly man had now, with the same dexterous movements, thrown a monogrammed sheet of the finest livery cloth over the horse and went to her head.

"All right, little lady," he said to her in a low, reassuring voice, and taking a bottle of water from an assistant's waiting hand, washed her mouth out. "Don't let her hang about," he told the lad. "Keep her moving about at a good pace."

They were out again in the cold May sun. The trainer took a card from his pocket and glanced over the runners.

"This Brown Bread Colt is useful. Who rides?—Gordon? Do you bet?" he enquired of Orina.

"Desperately," Orina declared.

"Well, if you can afford to lose a few shillings you ought to get twenty to one about Mr. Whyte's—before he goes over to the ring. Just you nip over to Tats, walk round the

boards, and when you see one with twenty to one Isles of Foam, pop your two shillings on. Now I am leading the young lady astray," he told Stephen.

Dennis remarked, "She's astray already," and then could have bitten off his tongue, he merely meant she bet constantly but it sounded wrong.

The trainer was shocked by this utterance and turned quickly to Stephen. "I've got Parcher to ride—he's good on this course."

"Do you think I should have a crack at it?"

The trainer raised his eyes in horror. "You won't go and be foolish about it, Mr. Whyte. You must have enough for an interest, but don't crack. Have a fiver each way, it will be a useful price."

"What do you think yourself?"

The trainer considered the matter. "Well, she's a good one, a real good one, and she's ready, but she hasn't got experience and I don't like the track for her. I'd have a fiver each way and save on Brown Bread, it's smart. The dam is the best Manna I have ever seen."

He moved off to talk to someone and Stephen, turning, found Dennis had gone and he was left standing beside Orina. She put her hand on his arm, a light friendly gesture of companionship, and as she leant towards him he saw how excited she was.

"You are going to crack it, aren't you?"

"I think so. He fancies it all right."

"So am I," Orina said, and she squeezed his arm. "Good luck or tight lines, whatever one says."

Stephen walked into the parade ring and joined his trainer and the diminutive form of Parcher, the jockey, who touched his cap and wished him good morning—a conventional salutation, the time being nearly four o'clock.

"Now Jim," the trainer said to the tiny man, "you have a nice draw. She will be all right at the gate, jump her off and keep upsides with Brown Bread who's drawn alongside you. You have a double handful, but don't let her out till you get to the distance and then be careful she doesn't sprawl about. Keep her collected, she's sure to run green if she gets ahead."

B

The jockey touched his cap again. To Stephen's mind he did not seem to have listened to a word that had been spoken, and in any case he could not gather from the instructions what exactly the jockey was supposed to do. He thought suddenly of Orina gambling desperately in Tattersalls and he said to Parcher:

"I am having a big bet on her—she's a good one, you know, class bred and been going well at home."

The jockey touched his cap again with the same expressionless stare on his face. Stephen felt sorry he had spoken; his trainer knew his job and it was unnecessary for him to butt in at all.

"What do they think will win?" he asked.

"They say," Parcher answered, "Gordon's a certainty."

"Get up there, jockeys," a voice called, and the boy led Isles of Foam to them.

Stephen noted that she was sweating a little as the boy whipped the sheet off her. The trainer whisked the jockey into the saddle.

"Remember," he said, "don't let her out in front till she's settled."

The jockey made a cheeping noise to his mount, who sidestepped away from them, and then reared. He seemed quite unmoved by this and cheeped again in a reassuring manner and the filly stepped quietly away.

Stephen and the trainer moved off back to the course.

"I wouldn't put too much on," he said, "she may run green. But she is quite a good longshot for a place."

Orina, unable to find Dennis, walked back to the stand alone. She crossed the road and passing through the green lawn of the members went into Tattersall's. A bookie caught her eye at once and beckoned to her. She moved to his board and noted the favourite Brown Bread was 6–4, and down at the bottom she noticed Isles of Foam at 100–6.

Orina asked him if he would give her twenty to one.

"Yes, lady," he said promptly.

"I'll have a hundred pounds to five," Orina demanded.

"Blimey!" the man remarked. "Is there so much money?"

"You won't take me?" Orina queried in dismay.

"You're on all right, lady, I've taken you. Bill, show Greta Garbo your book."

The clerk showed Orina the entry.

Orina started to count the money out of her bag.

"Don't worry," the bookie said kindly, "we will know you again. Come back and pay me after the race."

Orina was moving off but the bookmaker stopped her.

"You going to take it again?"

"Yes," she told him, "I was going to try and get twenty to one at one of the other stands."

He bent down. "I'll take you. What do you want? Another hundred to five? Right, Chalk it up, Bill."

"It's very kind of you."

"It's all right," the man said kindly. "I've got children at home like you. Don't want to see you crowded about amongst the roughs here. You run back to the paddock."

She took his advice and met Dennis.

"I've had a crack," said Dennis.

"So have I," Orina replied. "I've put my pants on."

"Don't worry," Dennis reassured her, "it will win all right. It's two to one on now."

"But," Orina questioned, puzzled, "I got twenty to one."

"You couldn't have, it's never been better than six to four."

"Isles of Foam?"

"No. Brown Bread. It's past the post. The greatest living certainty of the season. Two to one on Brown Bread, seven to one against the second favourite. I tell you it will walk it."

Orina reflected her bookie had good reason to take her money if the favourite was such a good thing.

She saw Stephen.

"I hope you didn't have too much on?" he enquired.

"I've got all my winnings on and everything else I have. In fact I shall have to borrow thirty shillings to pay."

"That's all right. It's strange—somebody must have been backing it, I could only get seven to one. Dennis?" he queried.

"No," Orina answered, puzzled also, "he's backed Brown Bread. They're off!"

A bell rang. They flew to the rails. Peering over, Orina focused her glasses on the mob of approaching horses. She picked out Stephen's colours. His horse and another were in front.

Stephen's seemed to be going easily enough, it threw its head about as if trying to get away but the jockey held on to it firmly. As they neared the crowded stands the other horse shot forward and somebody shouted, "The favourite wins by a street!" but Stephen's jockey let his mount out a little, and as the thundering hoofs approached, she saw the filly come alongside the favourite.

"Come on Isles of Foam!" she yelled, and heard Stephen's voice, deep and husky. "She can't do it!"

"Can't do it?" Orina shouted, shaking Stephen. "She's passed! She's in front!"

The two horses pounded past the post, there did not seem from where they stood an inch between them. There was a hush broken by a voice from the rails, "I'll take six to four the favourite!" then the numbers came up and Orina jumped in the air, for Isles of Foam had won by a short head.

Stephen patted the horse in the unsaddling enclosure. She kicked out viciously, her extended nostrils blood red. "Good old girl," he told her.

The trainer came to him, his face wreathed in smiles. "She's green, yet Parcher said she could have gone on, but as soon as she got upsides she was not keen to go in front. You know," the trainer admitted in a secretive whisper, "she's got a lot of class."

They walked away concocting visions of the Queen Mary Stakes at Ascot, Thousand Guineas and Oaks, a dazzling make-believe future. By the time they had a drink, Stephen held secret visions of owning another Pretty Polly or La Fleche.

"Here I am!" exclaimed an excited Orina.

"Yes, Miss?" the bookie enquired, looking at her.

Suddenly Orina felt that perhaps after all she wasn't going to get paid, not having given him the money. Her face fell.

"How would you like it, Miss? A cheque? It's rather a lot in cash."

Still doubting the man's honesty she said, "Oh, cash."

"Sure?" the bookie enquired. "It's a lot of money."

"Yes, sure."

He put his hand in his hip pocket and drew out a wad of notes. "Here's a hundred" He handed her the note, making certain she had it inside her bag. "And a fifty."

She looked at the white Bank of England note, it wasn't very different from a fiver when you saw it.

"And the rest in tenners?" he queried.

As he counted them out he said, "If you give me your address I'll send you a little present as a souvenir."

She looked up, surprised. "Haven't I got enough off you?"

He smiled. "I had heard this filly was a good one. I saw you walking about with Mr. Whyte, and when you put ten pounds on with me I guessed it was a real big bet for you and they must fancy it a lot. So," he said, and his voice rang with suppressed excitement, "I took a bit off them myself."

"I'm so glad," Orina cried. "I was getting quite worried winning so much. But you mustn't send me anything."

"I'd like to if you please."

"Well, Orina Flers, Twenty-four Knapweed Crescent, Kensington."

She waved as she walked away.

Bill, the clerk, winked at his boss. "She's worth a present at 4.000 to 2.00."

Stephen, Dennis and the trainer were all waiting for her in the bar.

"I've never been so happy in my life," she cried. "Did you have a good win?"

"I don't bet," the trainer said, "but I understand the Governor here took a bit off them."

"Dennis," she enquired, "surely that's more than a double whisky?"

"You're right, sister," Dennis replied. "It's two doubles —one on top of the other."

She squeezed his free hand. "I hope you didn't lose too much?"

He took a gulp at the drink and sang, "Throw your luck over your shoulder, march with the down-and-outs," beating the tiddly om poms on the bar-top with his fist.

Stephen and the trainer didn't fancy people who sang on race-courses and edged uncomfortably away. Orina, with that instant intuition of hers, noticed the movement and silenced Dennis.

She turned to the trainer. "Is there anything he can get out on in this race?"

"Well," the little man said, looking at his card, "this one Gordon rides is an automatic favourite. I don't see anything to beat it."

She took Dennis quickly by the arm. "Leave your drink. Go along and put enough on it to get yourself out for good—it will win, I feel it in my bones."

"All right," Dennis replied, suddenly determined, "I will," and he walked off.

"It's no use his standing about moping, is it?" she enquired of the other two.

"Yes, but suppose it doesn't win?" Stephen queried.

"It will win all right, it's tipped in all the papers and I saw it run at Hurst two weeks ago. It's a certainty. It had the race cold when it got shut in on the rails. It's a winner without a penalty."

The trainer and Stephen were surprised how much Orina knew about racing.

"If Isles of Foam hadn't won," she continued, "I was going to get out on it myself."

Captain Hoof drew Stephen's attention to a slim blonde girl sitting on a shooting stick. He gave Stephen a nudge. "She's so rich she can wear a fur coat in summer."

He smiled. "She looks as if she might be very good-looking under the paint. Who is she, Hoof?"

"Hilly Brist," the trainer answered.

Stephen considered. "I know the name."

Orina explained. "Oh, Stephen, you must know her. She's starred in at least half-a-dozen pictures, the most beautiful girl in somewhere or other, largest fan mail in the world. Don't you ever read the papers?"

"Yes, of course I know, but what's she doing alone at Ally Pally?"

Captain Hoof had moved off down the bar and talked to some acquaintances. He now returned and joined in.

"She's gone crackers on Lord Peter," he told them. "He parks her about anywhere and she likes it."

Stephen laughed. "If she knew Peter the way we do she'd keep those diamonds in the safe. What's wrong, Orina?"

"Oh, nothing, I don't feel very well—the excitement of winning so much money, I expect."

Orina seized Dennis's glass and took a long pull. Stephen noticed her finely-shaped hand trembling.

6

TUESDAY, MAY 16TH

(*a*) 8 *a.m.*

JOYCE was one of the family.

When the girls had finished that first deb. season and before the commencement of Mon Chapeau they had taken up good work in the slums. Betty hated it and usually cut her days slumming, but Orina had the knack of doing everything she took up really well and immersed herself in a mission which tried to save desperate cases. Orina had proved splendid at the job, with her rapid brain she had quickly grasped the girls' problems. No one could shock or frighten Orina and she became so popular with the girls that the professional members of the mission grew jealous and cast about for an excuse to get her out. An excuse was easily found when Orina was discovered during what was supposed to be a sewing class helping the girls to fill up football coupons, and as one of the principles of the mission was the suppression of gambling, Orina departed.

Joyce, however, had refused to be departed from her heroine. An illegitimate and unwanted child she was half-starved, beaten and bullied, and housed with the rest of her mixed brothers and sisters in a vermin-riddled sty of a single room.

Orina admired how Joyce had managed to keep going

through all this and preserve her natural gaiety and courage, so had taken her on (at Betty's expense) as their maid. She could sew beautifully and had a talent for keeping clothes well. But Betty, who had not the same friendly manner with servants as Orina, resented Joyce's disrespectful manner. She would sometimes throw a "Miss" about for Betty's benefit but Orina was always "Skipper"—the nickname the mission girls had given her.

Nobody knew Joyce's limitations better than Orina and when her own or Betty's mother came to see them she would take care to send Joyce out. 'It would be rather funny,' she had thought, 'if Mrs. Pask, used to the most beautifully trained servants, was to call.' She pictured an interview on these lines:

Joyce: "'Ullo, watcher want?"

Mrs. Pask: "Is Miss Flers in?"

Joyce: "She will be back from 'Ats' in five minutes. Come in, won't yer, and take a seat. Would you like me to fix yer a cup of tea? Or I can get yer stronger if yer want."

And, as Orina reflected, this would be Joyce with her best party manners on.

Betty had rung the bell. Sleep seemed difficult, and a rather dishevelled Joyce appeared.

"Good morning, Miss Betty. What's got you stirred so early?"

"I don't feel at all good," Betty said.

Joyce had drawn the curtains and stood looking at her mistress.

"Hangover?" she queried.

"No."

"Have you told the Skipper? Coo lumme, she ain't half in form. Got out, she has, at Ally Park. Woke me up in the middle of the night doing some sort of dance in her room. I thought the floor would go any minute."

Catching sight of Betty's face, she said quickly, "I'll fix you some tea", and sweeping her discarded clothes in her arms, glided to the kitchenette.

As she passed the bathroom she enquired, "Going to them Ats, Skipper?"

"Yes," Orina said dryly.

"Oh," Joyce remarked to herself, "narky this morning." Then aloud: "You'll wear your black tailor-made then. I've got you a buttonhole for it. You wait till you see it! Gorgeous and cute, too."

Joyce had the power of cheering Orina. Her solid optimism acted as a tonic. Sometimes she bullied and shouted at Joyce, but they were both fond of each other.

Orina started to sing as she scrubbed her long legs, "Throw your luck over your shoulder, march with the down-and-outs." Then she put in the tiddly om poms by rubbing her tooth-brush handle against the radiator. It made a pleasing but deathly din.

Joyce shouted through the door, "Miss Betty says to tell you to chuck it. It's driving her scatty."

Orina's only reply was to beat with her feet on the surface of the water, sending showers of spray over the tiny bathroom.

"Blimey!" Joyce cried. "One day you'll go through the card at Hascot and we won't have any flat left at all."

Joyce came into Orina's room as she was dressing. "I sy, that Mac will get a start seeing you so early. I don't ever remember you thinking of showing up before ten."

"I've got a big lunch date. And Mac Roberts gets sick if I only show up to say good-bye."

"Mm?" said Joyce interrogatively, but Orina did not enlighten her further.

Joyce shut the door. "Like the buttonhole, Skipper?"

"Yes, it's just what I want. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing, it's a present."

Orina turned towards her, was going to say something, checked herself and instead sat on the edge of the bed.

"You're in some sort of mess, Joyce. Let's have it."

"It's not exactly a mess, Skipper—I mean, it's nothing you could help over—but I'm scared. You know Ernie and me have been knocking about for a goodish time, and well, now he's in with the boys." She came over and sat

down beside Orina. "It's 'orrible. They have started a racket, see. They're racketing milk. Yer see, down our part there's quite a lot of small dairies, and competition is 'ot, so Ernie and the boys charges them so much a week to look after their bottles. They've got all the street kids in it, see, and the cops can't get a hold of them. There's too many in it."

"I think I understand," Orina said meditatively. "If these dairymen don't pay a bribe they smash their bottles."

"Yus, at least the kids do. They have them all set following up the evening round. There's some places the roundsman 'as to go upstairs with the bottles, and when he's away a moment the kids tip his tryke over and smash up the lot. Milk and all. I tell yer, it gets me so I can't sleep, you know."

"I know," Orina said with feeling.

"Wot's worse is Ern thinks I'm not swell enough for him, and I'm too narky cos I go on at 'im about the racket, see. He's taken up with a proper tart—smasher she is, got evening clothes and all. They go out dancing places wot's so smart you'd never think. Won't take me, see,—thinks I'm ignorant."

"What did he work at before?"

"That's the trouble, miss. He was so decent before. Took his dole and played the dawgs and horses and pools. Never over-spent, you know, respectable like us—but now he's got so much tin he doesn't know the likes of me. He's—oh, miss."

"Stop!" Orina said sharply. She saw Joyce was going to burst into tears. "Well, there doesn't seem much I can do, can I?"

"No, miss, that's what I said—there ain't."

Orina knew Joyce had something at the back of her mind and waited. After she had arranged the things on the dressing-table and jammed the wardrobe door, Orina smiled. She had bursts of generosity.

"You can have that silver rag of mine—I've only worn it once and I think it's unlucky. . . . I don't want it any more."

"Oh, miss . . ."

"Shut up!"

(*b*) 1.30 *p.m.*

As Orina and Dennis nibbled their lunch she decided to break off the engagement. Instinctively she knew the marriage would never be a success. Dennis was far too weak a character for her. Moreover her brain was so much quicker than his, a life making things easy for him would be unbearable to both. Then again, although she knew he was very good-looking, somehow he did not attract her physically. 'It's rotten of me, I expect, but I'll break it off now before we go any farther.'

"Dennis?"

"Yes, dear?"

"You remember that night at the hunt ball?"

"Of course. I wanted to talk to you about it, but somehow we never seem to get a moment to ourselves to talk about anything. My Colonel seems to have got his knife into me—I can't get the leave I used to now. Says it's new regulations or some rot. I've thought things over. I've decided I'm going to leave the Army when we get married. You know, Orina, I'm terrified of you."

"Me?"

"Yes. You see you're so lovely, so clever, and I know I'm a born biscuit, so I'm going to leave the Army. Mum will give enough cash to set us up in the sort of place you ought to have—where you can have your friends and be brilliant."

"Oh Dennis, I'm not really like that."

"Orina, you will never understand, but when I first saw you three years ago now I didn't think you were of this world at all. I just worshipped you."

"You shouldn't set up graven images, Dennis. I'm very ordinary, really. Oh, Dennis!"

He had pushed a plush jeweller's box across towards her. She opened it. Mechanically gazed at the large diamond, the modern cutting making it transparent with glowing fires.

Her rapid brain reviewed the position. 'If I'd only said what I meant to a few seconds ago it would have been all right. But now I can't, I just can't.' Or could she? Was it too late? Her long line of squire ancestors stretching back

through England's mottled history to a de Flers who had accompanied William the Norman had given her that truly British sense of chivalry which held that a word once given was a bond to be carried out, regardless of consequences or personal prejudices. Although she had made a new modern code of her own on most subjects, this age-old honour remained.

She took the ring and handed it to Dennis.

"You had better put it on."

She smiled at him with those soft alluring lips of hers, but her eyes remained troubled.

Dennis kissed her with the same aloof shyness as they taxied to the station. She knew it was her turn to kiss him back but somehow she couldn't.

'I'm a cold-blooded fish,' she thought. 'Dennis is far too good for me. I'll make it all up to him some way.'

But she couldn't kiss him. Instead she squeezed his hand and said, "You must get out of the way of thinking me so wonderful. I'm just a taty old spin. I hope you'll find me useful about the house. I can mend socks and tune in the radio. Will we be able to afford a lady's maid?"

"Oh yes."

"You have never met Joyce, have you?"

"No," Dennis replied.

Orina laughed, but she knew no household could be run with Joyce in it.

He put his hand on her thigh and squeezed it gently.

"I want you to have everything."

Orina wished he would move his hand but made no resistance. What was it she had always said, 'If you let a man kiss you it's only splitting hairs . . .' Well, she must, right or wrong, be true to her code. But Dennis removed his hand.

"I'll be getting leave for three weeks. We must get hold of Mum and go to Stephen's Island."

"Yes, it would be heaven," Orina heard herself say.

"Shall I announce it or you?"

"I'll have to write home, I haven't told them yet. We should go down for a week-end and let them inspect you."

"We could get married in the autumn," Dennis remarked. "I will be out of the Army by then."

The taxi had arrived at the station.

They carried on again through the carriage window.

"I must fly back to Hats—we're starting a new campaign." She was going to tell him about it but remembered it would be too difficult to explain all the finer points to Dennis, so instead, "I'm going out with Stephen to-night."

"Good old Steve," Dennis said. The train moved. "Give him my love and tell . . ."

But the noise of the whistle drowned his remark. She stood waving—the perfect type of modern girlhood.

As she turned to go she thought to herself, 'I am going against what I believe in morally. I am just as much a tart as Betty.'

(c) 2.20 *p.m.*

"So romantic, flying away to this Island, Constance. I don't know how you can bear to go just now, there is so much on. How will Ella ever get through her luncheon without you?"

Mrs. Pask was fighting a duel, a duel to the death, with her deadliest rival in the Social mountaineering competition. The rapiers were sharp; her opponent had slipped one in under her guard. It had pricked the flesh; she had been unable to parry it in time.

The feeders round the lunch table stopped to watch. Had they seen the speck of scarlet her opponent had drawn? There was no time to note the effect of the question, she must keep her eyes on her adversary. No move must escape her. A slip now meant instant extinction.

"I know," Mrs. Pask said, "it's a bore, but I've always been crazy to see Stephen's Island and it's very difficult to reach. There isn't another chance of getting there if I miss this boat."

She felt metaphorically that she had turned away the sharp blade.

"It must be a wonderful Island," she heard her opponent say.

Yes, she had turned the rapier aside. After a few slight

further exchanges she felt they could withdraw, but it would never do to hasten the end, it must come naturally.

"Yes," she enthused, "it's wonderful. I've always longed to go there." (Peace with honour!) "I've wanted to go—studied it for years. It's marvellous."

Yes, she had done the trick. They could all see that a lunch party, however distinguished, was nothing to this Island of Stephen's. How glad she was going to this unique place.

"Tell us about it."

Heavens! her opponent had merely led her into the open to thrust again. She didn't know anything of the Island. Surely, she thought, racking her brains, she must remember something, Stephen had often talked for hours about it. She could remember nothing.

"Do tell us," the other spectators implored.

She was back now against the wall and she couldn't think of a solitary thing about the place. There was a lull while she stood there, the point of her weapon down, her back to the wall, the deadly opponent standing ready to lunge the blade home. Mrs. Pask knew she was at this woman's mercy.

"It's a very *convenient* Island," her enemy said, slowly pushing the blade home.

The spectators gaped at her audacity in killing so brazenly her rival. They wondered if she would put her foot on the fallen adversary and wave the bloodstained rapier aloft. But no, she made the dignified exit of the conqueror and handed out a consolation prize for the runner up.

"Yes, it's a very convenient Island for Stephen. I hear he has just lost a fortune in Red Mountain stock. He can go there and economise."

Mrs. Pask felt she must draw her torn body away somehow. She said weakly, "That reminds me, I must ring up Orina Flers."

It had been a bad exit. She saw the spectators looking at each other and wished now she had thought of some other sentence. They scented some sort of scandal or intrigue where there was none. She had only coupled Stephen's name with Orina's because—now she thought of it, why had she? There was no connection that she could think of.

They all rose. The women's lunch party was over. It was half-past two.

(*d*) 4.35 *p.m.*

"My dear Babe." No, that wasn't right. "Dear Babe." Too cold. Just "Babe"—that was the best.

Dennis took a fresh regimental crested piece of paper out of the model sentry-box that contained the Mess writing-paper. He looked at it for some time fixedly, he had never noticed it before. An odd piece of bric-a-brac with a picture of a sentry in full Dasher uniform. It bore a small brass plate with something about presented by Colonel——

He must get this letter finished.

"I hope what I write will not come as too much of a shock."

'That's rather cheek—looks as if I thought I was indispensable.'

He tore it up and took a pull at the glass beside him.

"Babe," he wrote again in his large schoolboyish hand, "There's something I ought to tell you."

Yes, there certainly was something he ought to tell her. Perhaps it would be best to ring up. No, Dennis knew he could never say anything unpleasant when it came to the point, but he must somehow tell her before she saw it in the papers.

Oh, why had he ever started the Babe business? Nothing must go wrong now. Orina was so wonderful, a sort of dream girl, a goddess one could never quite understand, something which he must not lose.

'I will never get anybody like her again.'

He wrote with speed and firmness:

"I have become engaged to be married. I will never forget how wonderful you have been to me. She—the girl I am going to marry—is the girl I told you about so often. You will, I think, know how I feel and what it means to me, and I do hope you wish me luck. I should like it to end that way.

"If ever you want help don't hesitate, but write to

"Your old Denny.

"PS. Good-bye, Sweet."

He picked an envelope out of the sentry-box and addressed it, quickly licked and stuck it down by banging his fist on it.

A brother officer called from the door of the Mess, "Come on, Dennis, it's just on time."

Dennis stood for a second with the letter poised in his hand. He did not know as he stood there for the space a man takes to count 'One, two' that a human life depended on whether he posted the letter or not.

Suddenly he had an inner hunch like an old friend patting him on the back and saying, "Don't send it, Dennis, old boy."

He gulped down the rest of the whisky to strengthen his resolve to send the letter and be done with the thing, but this inner hunch, like a wise old man. patted Dennis on the back again and said—he could almost hear it saying it—"Tear it up, old chap, you'll regret it."

"Right!" he shouted. "I'm coming," and tore the letter to pieces and threw them in the basket.

(*e*) 8.15 *p.m.*

"I thought you sounded rather off this morning," Stephen hazarded as they sipped their coffee after dinner.

"Did I?" Orina said vaguely. "Perhaps we should be going. I hate tramping over people's feet. I'm a punctual girl by nature."

"Plenty of time. It's only a few minutes' walk and the Show doesn't start till eight-thirty."

"Then tell me more about your Isles of Foam, they sound rather wonderful."

"Well, I've told you solidly through dinner every mortal thing I know about them from the time Harkon the Viking built his lonely fort on the rocks of Clune, till the government evacuated the islanders and that peculiar man Stephen Whyte bought them. The only thing I haven't told you is that Dennis, Mrs. Pask, myself and a girl called Orina Flers are sailing from Loch Macht for these Islands on May the 19th."

Orina did not answer for a moment and then remarked,

"You must be a fast worker, as far as I can remember I haven't received any invitation cards."

"Well, I'll tell you. I went round and saw Constance. She didn't tell me in so many words, but she is determined to be out of London for the beginning of June—it's about some smart luncheon party she hasn't been asked to. It doesn't seem to matter farthings to you or me, but these sort of things make a lot of difference to a woman like that. So she was going to go for a trip abroad taking you and Dennis—who is getting some leave—but she doesn't mind where she goes and now is keen on the Isles of Foam. I think mostly because it's such a difficult place to get to and it accounts for her rushing off in such a hurry. Anyway, she was delighted and rang up Dennis right away."

"It doesn't occur to you, I suppose," Orina remarked in a casual but firm voice, "that I have to be consulted about a thing like this. I suppose you think I can walk in and out of my shop any time I like and they will still give me an envelope Friday mornings."

"Yes, I thought of that. Took Lady Forton out to lunch as a matter of fact—she thinks you're charming and work far too hard at the shop. She tells me some of the other girls only go there on pay-day to collect——"

"If she thinks that she's wrong," Orina said decisively, "practically all the girls work very hard and do a lot of overtime, too, with stock-taking and late orders."

"What's bitten you, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing, only I suppose I'm trying to work in this wretched shop and do my best, and everybody seems to think it's a sort of colossal joke in which we roll up for an hour before lunch and play bridge—the dummy hand serves the customers. And it's not true for me, anyway. I wish now I had gone into a proper store and earned my own living, same as all these millions of other girls do."

"Are you going to come or not?"

She did not answer his question, but in return asked him:

"If you were a girl, would you like to marry some man who put you in an expensive glass case and then got all his friends to come and see you all dolled up to the nines, standing

about like a stuffed squirrel, and they—the friends—all standing round and admiring? You wouldn't call it marriage—it's Madame Tussaud's."

"Well," said Stephen, "if I was a good-looking young girl like you I should marry the richest man I could find and get a watertight jointure out of him, and then have a good time."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You wouldn't really. You're romantic at heart."

"I used to be," Stephen said gaily, "but my Fairy Princesses all turned out deadly when one got to know them."

"I meant to look you up," Orina said, "but forgot. Are or have you been married?"

"Not guilty. Why?"

"Oh, you know, if you were married I thought I ought to meet your wife before I went to tête-à-tête dinners with you. I don't like doing anything, however innocent, behind people's backs. Why aren't you married? At thirty-eight you'll have a job to get a wife."

"With two million capital?" he queried.

"With one and a half. You can write off Red Mountains, they're sunk."

"All right, with one and a half."

"Oh, of course you could get married somehow, but a decent girl wouldn't marry a man just for money."

"And nobody would fall in love with me, I suppose?"

"I shouldn't have thought so. You're quite good-looking and attractive, but your mind isn't young and boyish any more. You're thinking all the time about your Red Mountains or what Isles of Foam will be like as a three-year-old, or how to put the world right. You don't think about the way a girl's hair curls round her ears."

"There's something in what you say," Stephen said thoughtfully. "Are you coming to the Island?"

"No," Orina said firmly.

"All right, don't snap at me. A civil answer to a civil question. Where did you get your name from? 'Orina'. Is it Christian or pagan?"

"I don't know. It's a family name, but Orina's nothing. My eldest brother is called 'Malmsey'."

Stephen laughed. "He's the chap who's so good at cricket—captain of the Eton Eleven a few years back."

"He ought to be," Orina responded, "after the hours I spent bowling to him when I was a kid."

"I should like to know your family, they sound rather fun."

"Funny is more like it. I should think as a family we're unique."

She stopped. A mad desire came over her to tell Stephen she didn't want to marry Dennis. Stephen was so understanding and smooth to talk to. One didn't have to make things easy for him. Why hadn't she broken it off this afternoon, when she had the chance?

"What sort of husband do you think Dennis will make?"

"Do you mean what I really think or what I ought to say?"

"What you really think."

"Well, he's a very nice boy, but simple and weak as water, and he can't understand you. I should think he would be a very nice husband, always doing things for you, and the more unfaithful he got the nicer he would be."

"Why do you think he would be unfaithful?"

"Well, I've only met you a few times and my opinion's probably wrong, but my idea of you is that you are very independent by nature, with a strong will and an entirely home-made set of ideals and morals, and you are keeping yourself physically and mentally for some dream man. And Dennis isn't your dream man."

Orina didn't answer, but opened her bag and started to forage about. At length she took out a two-shilling piece and three coppers. She jingled them up in her hand and slapped them down on the table. She removed her hand. They had fallen with the head side uppermost.

"Right," she stated, "I'll go to the Islands."

CYCLE TWO

THE ISLES OF FOAM

1

MONDAY, MAY 22ND

THE good weather continued and it seemed to all that they were in for a long spell of calm days. The slight swell outside the bay was going down and Stephen and Birdie talked long and earnestly about seizing the opportunity of making an expedition to Sundal. They had got out the old ship's lifeboat reserved for this purpose and all hands had turned to to paint it.

They supplied themselves with fresh food by line fishing in the evenings, catching baskets of lythe and saith with an occasional mackerel. The half-dozen pots were producing a small but useful supply of lobsters. Orina was now quite expert at pulling the little dinghy round while one of the men heaved up the heavy wicker creels and removed the crabs or occasional lobster and re-baited them.

Birdie Fraser sat in the stern of the dinghy this glorious morning as Orina, clad in shorts and a hiker's shirt, pulled lustily at the oars.

"It must take lobsters a terrible time to get about. They don't seem to have any fins or propellers."

Birdie smiled. "Oh no, miss, they are very swift. We have a saying in Gaelic," he translated slowly into his halting English, "There is the speed of the silver salmon and the flight of the mackerel and the swiftness of the soft-eyed seal and the rush of *Na Muice hara*——" He thought for a moment and then translated, "—of the big whale. *Ach chuireadch giommach na casan camasaor*. But the lobster with his crooked legs can make a wake in front of their noses."

"Meaning he is fast?" she queried.

"Yes, very fast," he replied softly.

The first line of corks was in sight and Orina steadied the boat while Birdie picked up the line and hauled hand over

hand at the black dripping rope. He pulled the streaming basket over the stern. It was empty. He undid the strings of the surrounding net and rebaited.

"She has been taken by the little crabs," he said sadly. "They are so small that they can dance through the wide mesh."

The trap re-set, Birdie slid it over the side and Orina could see the white bait inside the wicker basket sinking in the clear water.

They had practically given up hope when they found a large blue lobster crawling about the last pot. His thick claws looked formidable, but Birdie with a deft movement of his knife severed the muscles.

"Its claws are different sizes," Orina remarked, noting this peculiarity for the first time.

"They are for different purposes," Birdie told her. "This one is to hold on with so that the sea cannot sweep her away, and the other one catches her food. They are so strong that if a man put his finger between she could break it off; that is why I cut the joint. Such a little stroke to make a giant helpless, but one reads in the Book about Samson and his hair."

"You must be very sorry to leave your Island?" Orina asked.

"We are sometimes sad. We were so happy here. But the young ones went away on the ships to Canada and America, and the old ones were unable to live. In the winter the boats could not reach them—the storms—and when they were ill, nothing could be done, so the nurse and the schoolmaster made a writing and they all signed, and the government took them away."

"I expect they are sorry now they signed the petition?"

"They never think the same," Birdie replied. "They are glad to get back and some are glad to get away again, and others now will not go back and many of the old ones are dead, and the young do not care any more."

He thought it over for a little as Orina pressed her light rubber-soled shoes against the seat in front of her (there were always a few things missing from the island boats and there was no rest for the feet to push on in this one). She pulled in the long feathered strokes of a Thames sculler, having not yet acquired the short choppy sea stroke.

For some time they sat in silence.

At length Birdie said, "They're so scattered nobody knows now any more."

She could not fathom the meaning of the remark—if it had a meaning or was a wrongly constructed sentence.

"You have seen the fairies' house?"

Orina had; a rough dug-out covered by some massive boulders with ferns growing all over it.

"Have you ever seen fairies there, Birdie?" she enquired.

But Birdie was not going to be led into a long discussion about elves which might possibly be talked over and laughed about afterwards by the mainlanders.

At length he shrugged and said, "The old ones, they have seen them," and launched into a long and disconnected legend.

"Dougan and Farquar were giants," he announced, "and they came ashore to kill all the islanders, and they burnt their houses down. All except an old woman who crept away to the Island of Clune where she lived for a year and a day, and was frightened to light a fire to cook with, lest the giants smell the burning peat. But she was so hungry she caught a plaice and lit the turf inside its mouth so to cook it. And Dougan smelt burning and he said to Farquar, 'There is one left, let us go and kill.' But Farquar said, 'It is the fire we left behind us', and would not go.

"The boats came and got hold of these bad men and put Dougan on Stack Olaf and Farquar on Stack Harkon. They daren't leave them together otherwise they would knock sparks out of everybody. But Dougan held up his hand and implored the people who came in the boats to give him a drop of water, but they would not give Dougan any, because he was a bad man, so Dougan jumped into the sea and the men who came in the boats laughed at him for he couldn't swim and drowned quite quickly."

Orina pulled thoughtfully. This was obviously legend at first hand without the refining influence of a Hans Andersen or Andrew Lang.

"What happened to Farquar?" she enquired.

"The men came back for him to save him as he had been punished, but he threw stones at them as he was bad. So

they put him in the sea with a mackerel tied to his head and a gannet came after the mackerel and speared Farquar right through the skull."

Orina turned the dinghy at the pier.

Dennis caught the rope Birdie threw. "Sandy says lunch is ready."

She leapt from the boat and ran up the worn concrete steps, up the rough causeway with its flower-covered wall. At the top she paused, looking over the blue waters of the bay where a basking shark cruised languidly, its dark triangular dorsal fin wobbling above the surface; at some moments parts of its head and half its tail showed as well, making it look a veritable monster of the deep.

"Must be a good twenty foot," Dennis remarked at her elbow.

She knew, without asking, he was turning over in his mind the chances of capturing one of these beasts. Stephen had told her they were harmless except in the September mating season, feeding only on minute plankton, and there didn't seem much point, therefore, in killing one, supposing such a thing was remotely possible.

"Of course, a rifle's no good," Dennis remarked, following his train of thought. "One could noose the fin but then it would sink any boat we've got."

He stood watching the shark as it cruised lazily round the bay, its whole vast shape now visible against the silver bottom.

"Supposing you did get one, what then?"

"One could skin it," Dennis said thoughtfully, "and take its teeth out as souvenirs. Then they have oil. I suppose they must be some use for something."

She saw he had not really considered what to do with it, his whole mind dwelt on the thrill of capturing something really beyond the power of their puny weapons, being towed about the sea by the plunging monster. Orina wondered if primitive man had Dennis's instincts, a cat-like desire to kill because it was difficult and dangerous, or required resource and patience, or if the early forerunners of civilisation only killed for food or perhaps in defence. That was it—a lost instinct of defence dragon-hunting. His reasoning mind told

him 'Leave the blessed shark alone', but his unreasoning instinct said, 'Go out and smash it lest it smashes you.'

Another day, lying high up the slopes, looking over the little group of islands surrounded on all sides by endless sea, she asked Stephen his views on the subject.

"It's instinct," he said thoughtfully. "I can't tell you what instinct, but most men have it in some form or other. Alpine climbers who scale peaks from the most difficult angle, mountains that have been climbed from the easy side dozens of times, so one can't call it exploration—they will give you lots of reasons why they do it but they don't really know themselves. Like Dennis doesn't know why he wants to catch a basking shark. It's not that he wants the thing. His mother is rich enough to hire a proper boat and harpoon gun, and he could get two or three. No, it's not that. He wants to go out in an ordinary boat like we have here and get the creature out of the sea by his own strength and cunning. Exactly the same idea as climbing up the most difficult side of a cliff."

"Would it be inferiority complex?" Orina asked, as she sucked a piece of the wiry hill grass.

"No, I don't think so. It's not a motive one can sort of separate out from thousands of other motives. For instance, why did we suddenly kiss each other a few nights ago? It was admittedly a lovely night, the moon made a path of gold across the bay, we had just eaten a good dinner, we have a lot in common. But there, you are engaged to Dennis. I am years older than you and a man of honour. I would not willingly have suddenly taken you in my arms and kissed—well, you know how it happened. It was just both of us together. The funny thing is it seemed a perfectly natural thing to do. You didn't hesitate. I didn't. We just somehow knew we had to do it."

Orina lay back and put her arms behind her head, the faint breeze ruffled her curly hair, and she watched the smooth glide of the fulmars that sailed up from the sheer cliff near them and, banking with little quivers of wing feathers, sank back to the wild grandeur of the hundreds of feet of rocky face, every niche holding a patient fulmar nursing her solitary egg.

"Well?" Stephen enquired at length.

"Quite well and happy," she answered, the sensitive, mirthful corners of her mouth twitching. She moved her gleaming, strong teeth so that the blade of grass shot upwards and shut her soft scarlet mouth on it, holding it there, regarding it analytically. "It's beautifully made, this bit of grass, you know. I can see all the veins in it, where the sap must run," she murmured dreamily, releasing it.

Stephen looked at the roofless semi-circle of the deserted village, little dots of grey below them, and at the shimmer of the bight of sand in the bay, and then back at Orina. He noticed how her long, finely moulded legs had browned in the few days of sun, how arrow-like and flat she was till one saw the small rounded breasts clearly outlined below the stretched, blue, short-sleeved shirt. He suddenly remembered how like a boy she had looked that day at Ally Pally.

He felt rather than saw Orina was looking at him through the glossy blackness of her eyelashes. She turned over on her side so that they were facing each other. He sensed a quickening of the breath, a shivering thrill ran through him. Their eyes met and he noticed how bright hers were, shining like the silver sand shone in the bay there below the cellophane water. The grass had dropped from her mouth. As he watched the sensitive lips he noticed that they quivered like shaky grass in the bog.

Stephen felt himself quivering; a fire rushed through his body. He stretched out his hand and touched her moist, upturned palm. Orina's fingers closed round his and he knew the throb of the rushing flow of vibrant emotion that ran through her body. He recognised she waited for him to speak, to act.

The peculiar deep note of a siren reverberated up to them from the bay below. They sat up and looked at the little trawler that was steaming in. Their mood changed like the wet sea mist that sometimes swept over the islands from the vastness outside.

"We had better go down and see who it is. I made lots of friends amongst the trawler men when we were here before. They are very decent—look in to see if we are all right when they are passing." His voice was strange; he felt cold in the hot sun.

As they walked down the steep slope towards the Manse,

zigzagging backwards and forwards in single file, Orina led, stepping springily over the stone-covered face, tufted here and there with heather and studded with small wild flowers—pansies and tiny yellow rock roses—while little clusters of spiky orchis showed amongst the dead matted grass, dainty, curious blooms of varying pastel shades, mauve to white, with spotted tongues hanging out invitingly for insects.

As they neared the Manse, Orina enquired over her shoulder, "Do you like hooters, Stephen?"

Stephen walked on in front. She saw by the set of his shoulders that he was cross.

"No," he answered, "I don't like sirens."

2

THE SAME: EVENING

HE climbed down the slippery steps. "Hullo, it's Higgins from the *Lancashire Lass*, and Bert, the mate. How are you? Had a good trip?"

"Only just come out. Haven't had a bloody shot yet. Eh, lad, you look champion."

As they walked up the rough causeway the round, jolly man with his smiling face told him, "There's plenty fish, lad, we can nigh sink the bloody boat with them and all, but the middleman's getting all the brass. The owners are doing nowt and the sailors are just fishing for fag money, nor do I hear of fish-and-chip chaps tucking away much. It's flaming middlemen wot gets the stuff."

In the living-room they shook hands all round. Dennis was away trying to get a wild sheep.

"Got old Whiskers and Birdie Fraser?" the skipper asked, as they raised their glasses.

"He will be down in a minute from the village."

"You mean MacGriem?" Orina queried.

"Aye, Whiskers we call him. Used to bring out the grub in the winter when they lived here. Known him all my sea-life. Never got a word of English though. Aye, I took him Fleetwood once with a bad leg—got it chasing them birds. Only spoke a few English words: 'Good', 'Bad', and 'Got

any cigarettes?' Wouldn't take anaesthetic. Let them cut about the bone, never said nowt. Blinking hero, I calls him." He laughed. "They'd never seen nowt like him in Fleetwood, had they, Bert? Better than fair he was and all. Here he comes!"

The patriarchal figure of MacGriem entered, his bonnet held in his hand. He patted the two men on the backs and cried over them. "Good Skipper," he murmured several times. "Good Mate," and then added, an afterthought from the old island days before Stephen's stores, "Got any fish?"

The skipper laughed. "Ba gum, Whiskers, you don't alter much. I'll send you a fry ashore when we've caught summat."

"Where are you fishing?" Stephen enquired.

"Off Sunday Island to-night, just to see how things are going."

'Sunday Island' was the fisherman's name for Sundal.

Stephen knew what a night it was going to be, dead calm with the full moon and dawn breaking over the rocky slopes.

"Can I come along with you?"

"Why, sure, Mr. Whyte. I'll drop you back in the morning."

Orina pressed forward excitedly. "Oh, could you take me?"

The skipper hesitated, looking at the beautiful girl. "It's a bit rough. You could have a bob down in my bunk if you liked."

"I'll get a sweater," she cried, and was off to the bedroom.

A few minutes later they were rowing out to the trawler. Stephen had made up a present for the men of whisky. Orina noticed for future guidance the short-sharp strokes the skipper took.

They came alongside the trawler. It was larger than she had expected and looked battered and dirty with years of hard work.

The dinghy rose and fell beside her rusty sides. The mate showed her a pigeon-hole below the taffrail where she could get foothold and swing herself over the side.

Dave waved to them as he pulled the dinghy back to the shore. "See you catch us a fry!" he shouted cheerily.

Orina clambered up the rusty steps to the bridge house by the funnel.

"Shall I give them a blow?" the skipper asked with his hand on the siren cord.

"No, please don't," Stephen said. "It puts all the birds off their nests."

"O.K." Leaning out of one of the windows the skipper shouted a few unintelligible instructions.

The men acted quickly and the boat moved forward.

"We call this Parsons Bay," the skipper told them. "Sometimes we're glad to hide up in it when she really blows in the winter."

Orina heard one of the men on the deck below singing "Throw your luck over your shoulder, March with the down-and-outs." It always brought her back to the Hunt Ball and Dennis.

The skipper was telling Stephen about a trip he had taken the winter before. She listened attentively.

". . . So I thought we'd have a go up North Bear Island. Just try our luck. Filled her up with coal, decks and all, and did a Tommy Lipton as fast as the old battle-axe would do right up to bloody Arctic. See, it's so flaming far you have to be smart and get filled up with fish as full as she will the whole tally, and be quick abart it, otherwise your exes run up so high you can't make a go, see. When we get up to what is it the whole crowd are clearing out. It seems the friging ice is coming down; the Jerries, Italians, even our own Grimys and Deenies are scuttling home.

"We can't see a bloody thing as the sun never rises at this time. Not a blinking sight of it in three weeks—all done by artificials night and day. We're trawling abart all by our Tod Sloanes, if you will, not another vessel to lie to over the radio, and it's perishing bloody cold. A black frost, if you will, all the gear frozen and pouring hot water on fish before we can gut them, and as if we hadn't got enough it blows a gale. The whole bloody box awash right up to bridge.

"By gum we were catching fish though, mast high some o' the shots. There's a lot of poison bloody fish up there—Darkie Charlies and Miller's Thumbs—so chaps were getting spiked and swelling up like bloody floats. It got us all depressed, felt we'd never get back—so flaming tired you'd

see chaps fall down and sleep amongst guts. Abart the only laugh we got, it was that comical to see them.

"In the end the old box wouldn't hold any more bloody fish. Fifteen hundred kit, we must have had, we were so down. Happen we were more like a submarine, if you will. We'd been fishing deep you know, two and three hundred, and couldn't get nothing to shelter behind coming back. I began to think the old trunk would split in 'alf. I ask Bert what he thinks and he says, if it does go down it don't matter, it doesn't belong to him.

"It took us so long to Fleetwood we missed the flaming Christmas market and there was the biggest glut you ever saw. The whole bloody outfit had to go into fish-meal and the exes way up over the takings. Never made a bob on trip. It was that comical, after all the trouble we'd took, we laughed till we nigh split. Funniest thing I ever saw. All that piddling abart for nothing."

Orina pictured the scene. Here *was* a story of the sea, of endurance—men so tired they could not stand, battered about drunk with sleep, in the fish guts on the slimy decks; working night and day in the dark by the feeble light of the deck lamps, with a gale blowing, frozen with cold, while the skipper here in his stuffy wheel-house used his charts and his uncanny knowledge of the sea to catch fish and keep the men alive, and all for nothing, not enough in the venture to give them a profit.

She saw Stephen had appreciated the story. It was the sort of thing he would do—would stick out and accomplish.

"North-east a bit," the skipper said casually to the jerseyed figure at the wheel.

"North-east a bit," the man murmured.

Higgins came over to her. "You see here, miss, how easy they make fishing. We have this box," he indicated a lighted green plate not unlike some weird wireless set. "You see that light that keeps flashing across?"

"Yes."

"Well, watch where it jumps. See here," he pointed with his finger and she noticed the line clicking a spark in the thin illuminated band. "That gives us our depth. See here, it reads fifty-five fathoms."

Orina looked at the purple mass of Sundal against the evening sky. She noted the two stacks with the white tablecloth of nesting gannets still visible.

"Oh, isn't it lovely!"

"Aye, by gum, miss, you have got the right night to go trawling on, mighten get a night like this in twenty years. We're going to put the trawl down. Just keep up here, there's a lot of ropes."

They stood looking over the deck illumined now by the small bulbed lights lashed roughly about the rigging. The men were working.

First they paid over the metal supporting buoys which clustered about in the water. A few directions from the mate and they swung clear. Next the green glass floats went over with the net supporting the wings, and finally all hands shoved and sweated to tumble over the long line of heavy wooden 'bobbins' that kept the purse weighted open. Splash! they were over also.

Orina flew back to the story of the Polar trip and she tried to visualise the horror of lowering this massive equipment into the lashing, black waste while the boat plunged and seas broke over the men as they tried to keep their foothold on the slimy decks.

A man had run down the side and was deftly fixing a rope with a boat hook. The mate cried an order, there was an answering shout and splash! splash! the two huge boards at each end of the ship went over.

"Paravanes," he told her. "Keep the purse apart. Nets in the shape of a triangle eighty foot wide, twelve foot deep."

Two rusty winches were paying out the steel cable. The friction caused columns of steam to rise from throbbing drums. The ship was moving, the lights were dimmed.

"About three to four knots we make," the skipper informed Orina. He pointed at the purple shape of Sundal. "See Napoleon?"

She picked up the rocky silhouette.

"And further along there's the Lady," he indicated.

"She looks as if she was carrying a muff," Orina remarked.

"Aye, by gum, so she does," the skipper laughed. "And

she needs it some nights, I tell you, up there all the winter. But they're good landmarks for us, act as good as a dahn"

Later he took her down to his cabin next the wireless room.

"There's a bit of a mist coming down, why don't you turn in a little," he suggested.

"But I might miss the shot," Orina said.

"I'll see you don't. Slip your shoes off and jump in—an hour or two in a night makes a wonderful difference."

Without a word she slipped off her sand shoes and climbed into the bunk. The wireless buzzed and the skipper left hurriedly. She heard him talking to another trawler homeward bound, in his friendly way discussing market prices and how fish were running. Dogs, she heard, were a fair market, and haddocks were slow.

She looked at a printed government notice giving dimensions of different fish which had to be returned as below the limit. She laughed as her mind visualised the men splashing about in the wriggling half-frozen mass of fish with a foot rule or pair of calipers. The trawler life was infectious. "Bloody funny," she murmured almost unconsciously, as she fell asleep.

It was Stephen who woke her. He noticed her hair, the reddish gold glinted in the artificial light.

She woke at once, without stretching, threw her legs over the bunk and dropped to the deck.

"What's it been like?"

"Very misty. I didn't wake you the first shot—it was rather tricky, we couldn't see the rocks and the skipper was working about like a rabbit on a tightrope. It was a lousy shot, anyway, but now it's dawn. I don't remember seeing anything so wonderful before."

She had pulled on her shoes and followed him up the step-ladder. Orina gasped. The sight was so lovely, unbelievable, a dream. The morning sun was floating up from the brim of the sea, a sea the colour and form of the clearest flawless sapphire. Sundal stood before her towering, magnificent, finer than any work the greatest architect could have erected.

The skipper with his cheery good morning handed her a burning mug of tea. The clear rose sky was filled with thousands of gannets, snow-white, circling the ship. The winches were working, grinding away, hauling up the trawl cables, water spurting off the wire ropes in two steady streams.

Even the trawler itself looked beautiful. Somehow the rusty dirty ugliness of it took on the aspect of an old honoured sword, a precious heirloom of a chivalrous past, the hero of righteous battles against crippling odds.

The two paravane boards clanged and splashed up into their appointed forks, the top galvanised buoys and a seeming tangle of net floated. Now she saw the white upturned belly of a dying fish, wiggling drunkenly away. A shower of snowy Arrows descended on it, their black wing tips quivering, adjusting their direction as they dived. The fish was torn in half and swallowed in the space of time she took to say "Oh!" a gasp at the savage beauty of it all.

The men had got floats and the edge of the thick net over the side and were tugging and hauling to bring it in. A line of sweating, rubber-booted things with broken nails lugging and wrenching the heavy meshes, forcing the tons of net out of the sea.

The gannets were descending in showers now, she could see some of them, flashes of white as they shot down through the water, leaving behind a torrent of rising chromium bubbles. Others, filled, paddled in the smooth water near the ship so close she could see the pale blue of their eyes and the yellow down on their heads.

The winches worked and the purse came out from the amethyst depths, raining silver tears on the sea for the great mass of fish that had been crushed in its fold. They swung the bag over the deck. The mate ran forward and undid a knot, the bag burst open, and a cascade of slithering, slimy fish descended.

"Can I go down?" she asked the captain.

"Sure."

On deck she looked at the mountain of fish. Men had jumped into the writhing mass and were shovelling them out with rusty iron spades so they spread over a larger area. She noticed haddock, cod, plaice, flounders.

The mate picked up carelessly a squid, a large fleshy, cherry, egg-shaped, horizontal-tailed creature with a myriad white feelers each covered in suckers. She frowned at it. "Brute." He smiled. But Stephen behind remarked, "We can do with that for lobster bait."

The mate next picked out a loathsome scraggy beast.

"Nurse fish," he told her.

He held it towards her and she felt its sandpapery back.

"Only fish that shuts its eyes."

The men were busy now gutting.

"Pity," Stephen said, looking intently at the catch, "they haven't got a monk—very odd creature from deep water with headlamps."

Orina watched the amazing skill of the men as they picked up the fish, knife in hand, cutting them open as they did so, throwing the gutted fish into different bins and separating the livers from the other guts.

Goodness! how they worked, as if their very lives depended on it, and, she reflected, very often they did. The sweat poured from them.

"I'll show you the ice hold after," the mate promised, seizing a cod as he spoke. "Look full of sand eels." He emptied them out. "Good feeding here."

They toiled and sweated on. The mate got spiked by a dog fish and she admired the way, in deference to her, h made no comment.

From a pile of nondescript beasts he took a flat spine-bordered fish. "A John Dore. Look at the thumb mark." He indicated a dark splodge on its side, a large shadowy mark, a thumb might have made. "Happen it be Our Lord's thumb," he said reverently, "when he fed the multitude."

She looked over the dripping bulwarks at the halo of gold round Sundal. These men in their terrible life were not only brave, not only stuck together through the dark horrors of the stormy nights, but were beautiful also, like those other fishermen who saw the white figure walking towards them across the sea and hauled in the miraculous draught of fishes.

3

ANOTHER DAY

SHE put the cigarette in her mouth and struck the match against the scabby whitewashed wall of the ruined house, shielding the flame. Orina pulled the smoke into her mouth and let it drift out through the finely-cut nostrils.

Her mind returned to the object of her walk. She wasn't being fair with Dennis. He was shy of her. It was disgraceful to have been engaged a month and only kissed once. Perhaps he didn't really want her, was trying to get out of it; too shy and decent to tell her.

"I must go and vamp Dennis, get him to snap out of himself. I won't let him marry a wax idol. We have got to pal up, become friends, so he tells me his troubles and I . . ." But she knew her troubles were far too vague, complex for Dennis's intelligence.

Looking down at the semi-circle of empty houses she noticed smoke coming from one of the partially-roofed ones. "There's my man," she said aloud, and strolled down the over-grown cobbled path.

Dennis had chosen the house with care as the most suitable for his purpose, had lugged up a sack of coals and been working for several days fashioning his harpoon. Orina was amazed at his skill and ingenuity; she recognised the large iron bar, it had been lying near the Manse when they first arrived. But Dennis had skilfully transformed it into a professional looking harpoon.

"First," he told her, "I heated it and hammered all the bends out. Then I got the end flattened. That took a long time. There is no blast for the fire and it takes patience to get it hot enough. Then I had to hunt up a cutting tool to block out the rough shape. That beat me till I remembered my steel shoe-horn. When I had got the rough out Birdie—who is as keen as I am—showed me the best stone to use for whetting ragged edges. We went and got some Fulmers and took the oil out. You know, it's marvellous oil for the job. Feel." He held the neatly formed barb towards her. "Sharp?"

"Rather Dennis, it's a topping job." Orina felt herself back

with her brother, making catapults or carving yachts from railway sleepers. "Can I try the balance? Why," Orina queried, "didn't you ask me up sooner? I love this sort of thing."

Dennis, forgetting that she was there without an invitation, blurted out the truth. "I didn't ask you before because I was frightened you would sneak to Stephen, you know how he is—fussy about everything. Doesn't want me to go sharking—thinks it's dangerous. Did you see the stuff we took to Sundal—water, first aid set and toilet paper as if we were going away for a year."

Orina laughed. "There wasn't any paper."

"I'm sure there was," Dennis said smiling, "and toothpaste. I carried the bag down. It weighed a ton—everything from a stamp to a worm pill."

"It does get rough," Orina protested. "Look at it to-day."

"Look at my foot! We could have got back alright, even to-day. The thing's supposed to be a ship's lifeboat, passed by the Board of Trade to save passengers in a hurricane in the middle of the Pacific." He twisted the iron over in the fire resentfully. "I'm very fond of Stephen—always been frightfully decent to me—but I don't like being treated like a child and having Safety First and cruelty to animals preached at me. I'm just as fond of animals as Stephen is, but these baskers are a damned nuisance to people. There's far too many of them. They get into the herring fishermen's nets and cause pounds of damage, and they drift on to small yachts when they're tacking and smash them to bits. Look, Orina, it's all very well saying they're harmless; most lunatics are quite harmless, but they take care to keep them snug out of the way."

Orina knew Dennis had not got a logical mind fitted for argument, but she knew also how he felt. Since her experiences on the trawler she had seen what a hard life the fishermen had, and she could picture the destruction one of these thirty foot lumps of flesh would do in the frail herring nets.

She touched Dennis on the shoulder. "I'm with you. Baskers, old boy!"

"To hell with baskers!" Dennis cried. "Out she comes." And then he paused, but he said, "You're on Stephen's side. You wouldn't go against him?"

"Wouldn't I?" she exclaimed merrily, the spirit of the conspiracy growing on her. "Why should I care what Stephen says? I'm not going to marry him, I'm going to marry you."

For a second she felt a Judas, then remembered that she would say the same to Stephen's face.

Dennis was turning the harpoon slowly round and round in the fire. "There's something I ought to tell you," he said shyly, "it's been worrying me for ages."

"Go on. Tell me."

"It's rather difficult to tell *you*." He paused. "I suppose I'm not much of a chap really." He paused again.

"Oh, you're all right."

"I was out winter sporting in Austria this year. We had rather a good party. . . . There was a girl there with a chap I knew. She used to be in a show in London—rather fun. He went home and she stayed on—you know," he said, convinced that she didn't know.

"I didn't have a wild brother for nothing. I know. I don't mind." But Orina knew she did mind.

There was more. He was still living with this girl, hadn't yet told her he was engaged.

"I had to tell you," he finished lamely.

Orina knew that here was a door left open, a way of escape. It would be reasonable to thrown the thing up over this girl, understandable. Things came back to her. Stephen had known all along, had tried to prepare her. She herself had guessed it vaguely. Why should it matter so? It was nothing really. Stephen, for instance, she guessed, had had dozens of affairs, and some way she didn't mind. Why should Dennis's matter to her? She knew. For her any charm he had lay in his idealism of women; and this intrigue somehow spoilt it. Orina couldn't reason her motive. It was one of those intuitive feminine hunches that told her 'Now's your chance to get out of it.'

'I'll do it nicely. He won't mind really.'

She pulled forward an old herring-basket and sat on it gingerly, near Dennis so that she could talk chummily to him, explain her reasons carefully so they would go on being friends.

Dennis took out the bar and looked at it. It was not to his liking and he shoved it back in the blazing coals.

"You know, I'm not conceited," he said, resolved to explain himself, "so I can talk straight to you. I am quite a good marriage for a girl—I've a certain amount of money and Mum has a lot. Then I'm clean and tidy and have done all the right things—everything other people do; you know, riding and games, and I'm quite good at them. I have tons of friends and am fairly popular. I dance and keep up-to-date and all that. One day I succeed to a Barthood or whatever one calls it—when my uncle dies. Do you see what I mean? I'm eligible. Well, when I first joined the regiment I used to go out dancing a lot and was asked about everywhere—you know how Mum is always sucking up to people. Do you see, or do you just think I am a twerp to say all this?"

"No, of course not, I understand you."

"Well, I'm pretty dumb, but I'm not so dumb I couldn't see all these girls sort of laughed at everything I said, and told me how good looking I was—in a roundabout way, of course. Were doing that, not because they cared a tinker's sock for me—they just knew that if they couldn't get anything better they could do much worse than have me. Not exactly gold digging, but sort—Oh, I can't explain!—sort of decent gold digging."

"Making the best bargain they could for themselves and their future children," Orina supplied (like me).

"Exactly. Well *you* were going about at the time with that girl Betty Trent. Remember?"

Orina nodded.

"And I saw at once you were quite different."

"Oh no, I was just nest hunting, too. My family said openly and constantly that if I didn't marry well I had better come home, break in hunters, look after the chickens, and be of some use about the mortgaged acres."

Dennis smiled. "But I know several chaps who were crazy to marry you, who were wonderful catches."

"They managed to console themselves with other wives," Orina declared quietly.

"Well," (Orina rather wished Dennis would not begin

every sentence with 'well') "I sort of put you down as top of the handicap. If I could get you I'd let all the other little 'yes girls' go and boil themselves. Well, you know I kept on asking you, but I always got the red stop light until I felt it was really no good asking any more.

"Now this girl, Babe, was quite sort of different.. She couldn't stick me at first. Whenever I tried to make love to her she said, 'Don't talk so well dressed.' She didn't care brass hairpins about the 'Sir Dennis' and the Eton and all the other things. Finally I thought, As I can't get Orina, this is the girl for me, so I proposed to her."

"Oh!" Orina said. "What did she say?"

Dennis laughed. "She didn't know what I was proposing at first, and when I said marriage she asked if that meant signing at a registry office or going to church, because if so she would have to say No as she married a steward on a liner when she was sixteen and as far as she knew he was still about somewhere. Well, when we got home I took a flat. She said, 'Give me a month's rent.' So I gave it her and she wrote and addressed a letter to the landlord saying I enclosed a month's rent in lieu of notice, stuck down the envelope, put it on the mantelpiece. 'There,' she told me, 'when you're fed up and want to go back to your old college set, drop it in the letter-box.'

"That's how we've been ever since."

Dennis removed the iron bar and started hammering it round the pulley which Orina held in position with a piece of broken oar. She watched the professional way he struck the stone between each accurate blow—clang, clung, clang clung.

Dennis wasn't really the clothes peg she had thought him. He was sensitive with mushed but rather pathetic longings to be loved for himself. Clang, clung. But what was his self? What could one find to love in him? Clang, clung. Possibly he could marry this girl, the steward's interest might be bought out.

Dennis replaced the harpoon in the fire, and drew up another of the old fish baskets that littered the rubbish-covered floor. The wind was rising and howled in powerful blasts outside.

"Well, I suppose I got a bit lit up that night at the Hunt Ball. I saw you in that silver dress as I arrived—you were just going to dance with somebody. You looked lovelier than I had ever seen you. I forgot Babe, forgot everything. I just knew I would regret it all my life if I didn't have one more pop." He paused and threw a little coal on the fire. "When you said Yes, I somehow daren't kiss you. I knew you were so much finer—above me—not of this world. I trembled all over after you had gone, as if I'd ridden the winner of the National. Then you said you had accepted me because you were getting old and a spin."

"Did I?" Orina asked.

"Yes, but I loved you for telling me the truth. I knew where I was. You would never love me for myself, because you were so much cleverer than I, but you would consent to keep house for me, take my name, be good to me, and that was enough. 'The scraps that fall from the table'."

Orina sat silent. Dennis had finished. She saw new lights in his character she had not suspected before. No, she couldn't get out of it now she had given her word, it meant so much to him. She would stick to it. There remained one slight ray of hope.

"What are you going to do about your young lady—or shall we all live together?" she said laughingly, so he could take it any way he liked. She waited breathlessly for his reply, hoping that he would release her.

"I wrote her once, but lost my nerve. Now I am prepared, as soon as I get back, to post that letter from the mantelpiece."

He came towards her and slipped an arm shyly round her waist. She looked up at him feeling as if she was sitting in a dentist's chair.

She put her arm lightly on his sleeve as one did with a dancing partner. "I won't let you down," she heard herself say, "you can trust me. I'll make you happy."

"It's nearly two!"

They jumped apart like guilty children. Stephen stood in the doorway.

He smiled. "I know love knows no time limits, but the fish pie is getting tired waiting.

CYCLE THREE

HELL WITHOUT FLAMES

1

THURSDAY, JUNE 1ST

DENNIS rang the bell, the key forgotten. It didn't matter—he had wired Babe to expect him.

The flat bell pealed close to his ear shiveringly; it jarred down his spine, perhaps because it was so different from the far away echo of the mansion bells he was accustomed to, his nerves were stretched like wet rope.

He heard Babe shuffling towards the door in slippers. Goodness! how he hated this interview. Babe was the only girl he had ever known who he had been really at ease with. He liked her—in passionate moments had suggested burning words of love—but he must get out . . .

The latch spring grated, she turned the knob.

"Hullo, Babe!"

"Hullo, Soldier! Come in."

They walked into the living room. Dennis threw his hat on the small sideboard. It skidded, rumpling the narrow strip of embroidered grey linen that was weighted by a plated basket of fruit.

They did not speak, but Babe threw her arms round his neck, flattening her small body against his. She looked up at him, he felt the warm glow of her lightly-clad form; he stooped, their lips met. She altered the position of her hands so that one of them pressed his head down on her mouth. He felt the hot searching acid feel of her tongue against his, the old peculiar scent—a garish, faintly Eastern perfume—he knew she had just put behind her ears. 'Love in Paris' it was called. He remembered the brightly coloured label. Lots of things rushed back to his mind, forgotten memories of coarse sheets and drawn velvet curtains with just a chink of daylight through the tasselled fringes and the smell of warm sweat.

He put his hand firmly on the small hard curve of her behind. She wriggled up closer to him and he held the flesh through the silk firm in his grasp. He carried her, still kissing, into the chilly bedroom.

The creaking of the bed died down—a long pause . . .

A noise came through the thin door. It was Babe shuffling her slippers on. The door opened and the pretty creature wrapped in a thin silk dressing-gown entered, shuffling in her high-heeled slippers. She took a handful of cigarettes off the mantelpiece and putting one in her mouth, lit it with a spill from the wavering gas fire. Then she moved over to the sideboard and kicked the fancy brass catch. The door swung open and she pulled lazily out a paper-covered bottle of whisky.

"Got a knife?" she called through the door.

"No, but I can get the cork out."

She shuffled back singing quietly, "There's a tear for you from the girl in blue, Tiddly oi, Tiddly oi, When your dreams come true she'll come walking through, Tiddly oi, Tiddly oi."

"Shunk!" The last noise came from the bottle.

"Wait till I clean it."

"Oh, it's all right," from Dennis.

"No, I washed my teeth in it."

Splash! Splash!

"Sorry, I haven't any soda—there's some ginger beer somewhere."

"No, water's all right."

"It's our new number, do you like it? We're gorgeous with swagger canes and silver hats. On the second 'Tiddly oi' we break into a tap. Look! Tiddly oi, tiddly oi, tap tap shuffle. Then a long scraping noise. Now we put our canes round our necks and let them slide down over our arms and catch them. Oi! Then tap tap bang tap Oi. It makes a lovely finish."

The hands of the new world clock swirled round, the long hand twice over the blobs that replaced the restful Romans.

Babe and Dennis entered. They were what is technically known as in 'good form', that's to say they were rather

drunk. Babe turned out the gas fire; it died slowly and then popped loudly, leaving a pile of skulls.

"Do you see your letter—it's still here." She pulled it out from the back of the clock and shook the dust off. "Do you want to post it?"

Dennis poured the last dregs of the bottle into the tooth-glass and drained it, but he did not answer her question. Instead he stated, "After you have done your show we're going to drive out to a place I know and have a real party."

It was four in the morning when the real party was over. Both Dennis and Babe were now definitely drunk. Dennis flopped into his speed car without worrying to open the door for his companion.

Babe climbed over the other door, unable to manipulate the catch, and slumped down on the seat, where she bounced up and down a few times, then remarked to nobody in particular, "Shut up." Next she pulled her hat off and laid it between them. "My head's hot."

Dennis stretched over the gear lever—the same one that Orina's leg had pressed against that night in April—and kissed the top of her head. Then, starting the engine, he released the clutch and the engine stalled. "Must be in gear," he said foolishly.

"Then put it out of gear," Babe remarked logically.

"I'll have to tell Rina about you, Babe."

"Then tell her," Babe said. The fresh air was reviving her.

"But I have told her," Dennis answered argumentatively.

"Well, don't tell her," Babe replied. "Who's Rina anyway?"

"She's lovely," Dennis informed her abstractedly.

"How ish she lovely?" Babe enquired.

"About five foot ten lovely."

"Too much lovely."

"No, not too much. Jus' lov—lov——"

"Beautiful. Look at the stars up there—thusands and thusands of stars."

"They're not starsh—they're lamps—streets of lamps."

Dennis pressed the self-starter again, the engine started bumping powerfully.

"Holman says the brakes are too hard worn so he's sacked."

"Quite right," Babe answered. "Sack him—sack them all, narky bloody servants—sack that maid in the flash too flat for us."

The change wheels screeched.

"Wrong gear," Dennis said apologetically.

"Then put it in the right one, silly."

"Silly yourself."

"But nice silly."

Suddenly Babe sat up and caught Dennis's sleeve. "You must go very shlow or cops will say drunk in char——"

"Very slow," Dennis murmured, moving off at a snail's pace, bumping against the kerb. "Nice and slow."

They meandered down the side of the road, Babe half asleep, then Dennis cried:

"Sing something, keep me awake."

Babe yawned, putting her hand carefully in front of her mouth.

"Sleepy to sin'."

"SING," shouted Dennis.

"All right," Babe replied weakly. "I'll sing. Throw your luck over your shoulder . . . "

Dennis joined in. "March with the down and outs."

He put in the tiddly om poms with rhythmic jabs on the accelerator pedal. The car quickened its pace. The road was deserted and the jolliness and rollickingness of the song revived them.

The speedometer needle rose rapidly—50, 70, 76 . . . Dennis's foot was right down now. They screamed along the side of the road. "Throw your luck over your shoulder, March with the down and outs," they yelled. 78—80—84 quavered the needle. Dennis beat out the tiddly om pom poms by short, sharp blasts on his horn—hoot toot tiddly om pom hoot.

A corner was ahead with a garage and plate-glazed showrooms facing them. Their headlights shone on the windows,

making it appear optically as if two cars were rushing towards him on the wrong side of the road.

To his left was a steep embankment. He swerved the car, the tyres screaming, over to his wrong side. A broken-down lorry stood against the right-hand kerb with a flickering road-lamp in front of it. Dennis saw it too late. He jammed the brakes, but nothing happened. He lost his head.

Babe screamed. Letting go the wheel he flung himself in front of her, trying to protect her with his own body. There was a terrific impact and the car bounded vertically, the rear wheels howling. Dennis was thrown violently out through the windscreen, holding Babe's hat, the only thing he had managed to seize. He missed a lamp standard by inches and hit the gravel side-walk full in the face and passed out.

The large sports car had somersaulted over on to the lorry, the engine roaring. He saw the car burst into flames.

He ran stumbling, sobered, across the grass strip between path and road and dived into the flaming wreck where Babe was entrapped. He could see nothing. The heat was scorching. His hands touched her bunchy clothes. He gripped her body and, struggling blindly, pulled her clear. Staggering back to the grass he fell and rolled her over to extinguish her dress, clapped his hands on her burning hair, then rolled over himself in the dewy grass to put out his own smouldering clothes.

He raised himself on his knees. Lit by the leaping flames, he looked like a wounded ape to the girl and old man who stood on the sidewalk. His hands and face were bleeding from innumerable cuts and blood from a wound in his scalp poured down his face. He felt too weak to rise to his feet so crawled back to Babe. Her dress was half-torn; he pulled it down to hide the brightly coloured silk drawers that he felt the onlookers must not see. One silk-covered leg was soaked in blood and as he raised it the shoeless foot fell limply, her ankle had been broken off fairly high up, and the neat leg resembled a rag doll's with the bran run out. He laid it gently down and felt cautiously up her body to find what further damage had been done.

Hope started to spring up in him as he worked his way up, feeling the bones. Perhaps she was only stunned as he

had been stunned. Not dead as her coldness suggested. "Not dead—No, Babe, you can't be dead," he murmured brokenly. "I can't have killed you."

One arm seemed whole and except for her leg there did not appear any violent marks on her. He turned her over to examine the other arm and thus saw the face he had so often kissed. He shut his eyes in horror and, groping drunkenly down towards the blazing car, was violently sick. Somehow he knew it was the large chromium-plated thumbscrew on the windscreen that had smashed through her skull.

He shook and shivered, his eyes shut. Babe's face danced before his red lids—the burnt hair, the great welling hole, the blood oozing down her cheek. He crawled back and noticed vaguely that the old man was standing with his hat in his hand beside the corpse, while the girl had evening clothes on below her overcoat. Why he should see these things, notice them, he couldn't think.

The flames were dying now on the car. A man in railway uniform joined the group. He seemed to appear suddenly from the gloom. He picked up a rug, curiously enough untouched, neatly folded as it had been by Dennis's soldier servant that morning, unfolded it and used it as a shroud over the pathetic heap.

This action seemed to release the other two. The girl talked excitedly with the old man.

"I was coming from the station . . ." Dennis heard her say.

He looked at the little mound below the green tartan winding sheet.

"Drunk," the girl muttered, "hooting away like a mad thing."

The railway employee put his arm round Dennis's back. "Come on, old man, you can't do any good here. You have got cuts to see to."

Dennis shook himself free and knelt beside Babe. He wouldn't—couldn't move the rug, uncover her gashed, broken face, but he found her cold hand and held it.

The old man declared, "Too fast—all drunk."

The uniformed stranger got Dennis firmly under the shoulders and lifted him up. He was unable to walk without support. Dennis put his arm round the other's neck. He

felt there was some statement that needed challenging, something concerning Babe's honour. He turned, the blood streaming from him, and shouted hoarsely, "I may have been drunk but she was not—*not*, do you hear?" he told the girl in the pale blue silk dress below her tweed coat, a little, greasy-haired thing. "*She* was *not* drunk, and if any of you dare to say she was I will hound you through every libel court in the country."

The girl shrank back terrified by this large savage man with the blood gushing down his clothes into a pool on the pavement.

"All right, mate," the worker told Dennis, "I'll see they don't say anything against your young lady. Come along now and I'll get you bandaged up away from them."

Dennis thanked him as they walked. "I am sorry to be such a weight."

The stranger whispered advice in Dennis's ear—the same sentence over and over again. He seemed anxious Dennis should understand him, but the words eluded the bleeding man. "Do you get me, mate?" his companion asked, shaking him, but Dennis only mumbled, "I'm so glad I didn't post the letter. . . ."

2

A WEEK LATER

ORINA and Constance sat on in the car till Stephen joined them.

"It's going well. There is a long discussion on now about the height of the bank on the left hand side of the road. We have an expert who declared that if a car mounted it it would turn over."

"How's Dennis?" Orina asked.

"He seems very dazed. I am a little bit nervous about his evidence. He keeps on muttering to me 'I was tight but Babe was not', and he says he was playing a tune on the horn and then he saw two cars approaching him and sounded a long blast."

"You have told us that you were on point duty at Sivers Cross on the night in question, and you did not see, about

the time of the accident, two cars pass you, going South?"

"That's right, Sir Charles," the constable replied.

"How far is Sivers Cross from the place of the accident?"

He considered the matter. "About two and a half miles."

"How many side roads come into the main road between Sivers Cross and the point near Aserfield corner, where the accident took place?"

The constable wrinkled his face in thought.

"Well," Sir Charles said testily, "you must know, it's your beat."

"I have only been on it two weeks," the policeman answered warily. "There's Aserfield Road and Farm Lane—a very small road."

"Never mind the size of the roads. I just want to know how many roads there are that motors can get down on to the main bypass."

"Well," the constable said at length, "there's just two—Aserfield Road and Farm Lane."

"That's all?"

"Yes," the witness answered. "That's all. There may be foot-paths."

"Would you call Chesipeak Avenue a footpath?"

"No," the constable agreed. "That's right—there's Chesipeak Avenue."

"And where does that road come from?"

"It comes from the main High Wanting road."

"That's right." Sir Charles glowed. "A very busy road, isn't it?"

The coroner looked reproachful.

"Sorry. I beg your pardon, sir, I will alter my question. Would you say it was a very busy road?"

"Yes, sir, quite busy."

"How do you mean quite busy? Would it surprise you to know over six thousand cars passed down it in one night at the last road census?"

"I didn't think it was as busy as that."

"Oh, you didn't think it was as busy as that. Have you heard of Mill Stream Road?"

"Yes, but very few cars come out of that and I can see it from my post."

"Oh, you see it from your post. Doubtless you watch it very carefully?"

"Yes, Sir Charles."

"And yet when I ask you how many roads lead into the main road between you and the accident you can't remember Mill Stream Road which you watch so carefully."

One of the jurymen smiled broadly. Sir Charles seemed to have torn the constable to pieces. He did not know what fine threads the barrister was working on that it was very seldom that any car went down these small country lanes in the middle of the night, far less two racing motors.

"I swear by Almighty God that I will speak the truth, th whole truth, and nothing but the truth concerning the death of Mary Isabella Blane, so help me God."

"Will you tell the jury in your own words what happened on the night of June 1st?"

"Babe and I were going home——"

"By 'Babe' you refer to the deceased?"

"Yes, sir. I was keeping well into my own side of the road—there is a sharp corner a mile or so before the big cross roads at Sivers Cross, and on my right is a steep embankment which runs right down to the road. Just before I got to the corner two cars came round on the wrong side of the road, right into the kerb. They were racing each other and coming straight at me. I couldn't get out of the way on my proper side, so I thought I would have time to go over to the wrong side and avoid them, and I swerved the car across the road. I suppose I was dazzled by their headlights, but as I got over out of the way I saw a big lorry right in front of me, drawn up at the kerb without any lights. I jammed on the brakes and pulled the wheel over, but I saw we couldn't get out of the way in time, so I threw myself in front of Babe. There was a crash and I suppose I was thrown out and knocked out on the footpath, and when I opened my eyes the car was burning."

"Would you mind speaking a little louder."

"When I came to again the car was in flames. I felt rather stupid, but I got down to it and got Babe out. We had both caught fire so I rolled about in the grass to put out the flames, and then when I looked at her I found—I found. . . . Need I say any more?"

"I quite appreciate your sorrow, Mr. Pask, but could you tell the jury what you said to the witnesses?"

"Yes, sir. There was a girl and an old man standing there. I hadn't seen them before, and they said something about Babe being drunk, and I told them she wasn't drunk. I think I said something about having them up for libel. I really didn't know what I was saying."

"Now, Mr. Pask, think carefully. Can you remember if you said that you were drunk but that the deceased was not drunk?"

"I can't remember."

"Is that all you remember?"

"Yes, only I should like to thank the railway chap. He was very good to me and got my head dressed, and I am afraid I dripped blood all over him."

"Who was this railway man you speak of?" The Coroner turned over his papers. "We have had no evidence before about him."

"I don't know who he was. He got a rug out of the car and covered Babe up, and he took me along the road and bound up my head. It was rather sore and I think I passed out. Anyway I don't remember anything till I woke up again and I was in hospital."

"It's very strange we have heard nothing about this man before." The coroner paused and a murmur went round the jury.

"He was very decent to me, anyway," Dennis stated firmly. "He kept telling me . . ." And then Dennis stopped in the middle of the sentence.

There was an expectant pause.

"What did he tell you?" the coroner asked.

Dennis looked puzzled round the room and then back at the coroner as if wondering whether he could tell him or not.

"Oh, I don't think it is of any importance."

Sir Charles Porch watched Dennis anxiously. Half a minute passed.

"Well?" the coroner said with impatience.

"I can't remember. It doesn't make any difference now."

The coroner asked Sir Charles, "Are you calling this witness?"

Sir Charles stood up, he seemed uncertain what to say. At length he remarked, "I don't think we shall require him."

The coroner turned back to Dennis. "Would this man see the whole accident?"

"Yes," said Dennis. "He must have. He told me he was crossing the road by the overhead bridge when it happened."

The coroner turned back to Sir Charles. "He may be a very important witness. Would you like me to adjourn the inquest?"

Mr. Sleat rose to his feet. "I think I may be able to throw a ray of light on the subject. The police, who have been making enquiries, can find no trace of such a man. I can call the sergeant."

The coroner waved a hand towards Mr. Sleat to be seated and returned to Dennis.

"Are you sure there was such a man?"

Dennis thought for a moment and smiled, himself puzzled. "The other two, the old man and the girl, must have seen him. I think he spoke to them."

Stephen slipped out of the courtroom. He found a knot of constables in the corridor. One of them approached him and touched his helmet.

"After the case we have made arrangements to get your party out by the back entrance. Mrs. Pask's car is there and you can slip into it and drive away quietly."

"Why?" Stephen asked at a loss.

"There's a very large crowd in front of the building, several thousand," the constable told him. "It would be best to go away quietly."

"Thanks very much for your kindness, I will see what the others wish to do." He walked quietly back to his seat.

They had recalled the girl. The coroner was questioning her kindly.

"And you are sure there was nobody there but the old gentleman?"

"Quite sure."

Dennis leant over to Porch and murmured in his ear.

"Mr. Sleat, any questions?"

Mr. Sleat shook his head.

"Sir Charles?"

Porch rose and enquired, "It has been stated that the deceased was covered by a rug. Do you remember her being covered?"

"No, Sir Charles."

"Do you remember that she was covered?"

The girl thought. "Yes, she was covered with a rug, but I can't remember anybody doing it."

"Let us reconstruct," Porch said professionally. "Did my client cover her with a rug?"

"Your client?" she enquired vaguely.

"Yes, Mr. Pask."

"No, he didn't. I saw him all the time."

"Did the other gentleman—our deaf friend?"

The girl smiled. "Oh no, he just stood there all the time. He didn't."

"Well, who did then?"

The girl considered, pondering, twisting the strap of her bag. She had got accustomed to the court. "It is very funny," she told them at length, "but I am perfectly sure there was nobody else there at the time and yet I remember that there was a rug over the young lady."

"What happened? Did Mr. Pask leave you? Tell us in your own words how he left you."

"He stood and cursed us for some time because we had said they were drunk, then he tottered off down the road."

"Did you not follow him?"

"No. The old gentleman and I went for the police. We didn't see him again."

"Would you describe him as being badly injured?"

"Yes, I suppose so. He seemed all cut and bleeding awful."

Sir Charles pointed to Dennis, still covered in bandages. "And you let him walk off down the road by himself," he said reflectively, and added, "Are you sure there wasn't anybody helping him along."

"Yes, quite sure he was alone. I suppose I should have done something but I was terrified about it, he looked so savage."

"There's just one other thing I want to ask you, Miss Todle. Do you think it possible that a man drunk as you have described, could walk along the road unaided?"

The tawdry little woman considered this. "No, it doesn't seem likely, but that's what happened."

Stephen and Orina slipped out into the corridor, the police made deferential way for them; they went into a waiting-room, a bare cheerless apartment furnished with six Windsor chairs and a dark leather-covered table with a jug and glass of water on it.

"What do you think?" Orina asked. She trembled slightly and her face looked drawn. The cigarette shook in her mouth Stephen noted as he held the match.

"I can't make it out. All the stories seem to vary. I don't think the girl knows what happened. I can't understand that nobody saw the approaching cars. You would think they must have heard them."

"Yes," Orina replied thoughtfully, as she let the inhaled smoke escape with a deep sigh. "But this other witness. I am sure the girl is trying to speak the truth. She has been very fair in her evidence."

"I know," Stephen said. "I can't understand it either. You heard the ambulance man's evidence. He found Dennis lying unconscious at the side of the road and there was nobody there. I think he was so stunned he didn't really know what was happening—just wandered off, as the girl told us, and fell down in a faint."

"Yes, but if he did that, who rang up for the ambulance? Somebody must have, and they say they only rang the police. Couldn't Sir Charles question on that point?"

Stephen shook his head. "He doesn't want this evidence brought in at all. Didn't you hear him tell Dennis at lunch not to mention it."

"Yes, of course. I remember now. That's probably why Dennis pulled up short."

"Ah yes, of course, that will be the reason."

But it wasn't.

Mr. Sleat had been hammering away at Dennis for an hour, his head ached, and he couldn't think, he was trying to tell the truth, and at the same time remember the things Sir Charles had told him not to say. The coroner was very kind and offered to postpone the case, but Dennis couldn't bear the thought of another agonising day of it. 'I will fag on,' he thought, gripping his mind, trying to focus it on this endless technical argument about the brakes.

"No," he said firmly. "No brakes, however good, could have pulled up the car in that space."

"Because you were going so fast?"

The wretched Sleat had trapped him. There must be some answer. Was he going fast? Yes, he supposed he must have been. Some sort of reply was expected of him. What could he say? He went back to his first answer and qualified it.

"No car could have pulled up, whatever the pace."

Gosh! how his head ached. What did the Sleat fiend say now?

"Perhaps you weren't in a very good position to judge!"

Well, there was no answer required to that, thank God; just a cheap dirty sneer, kicking a man when he was down and couldn't answer back.

What was this? Sleat gazed at him insultingly, reminding Dennis of Charles Laughton as the Captain of the *Bounty*. A road lamp in front of the lorry? No, he hadn't seen a road lamp.

"An oil lamp?"

"No, no lamp at all—no light. The whole thing came as a surprise."

He was firm, that was one point he could be sure of.

"It might interest you to know that the lamp in question was found under the smashed car. There is little doubt that this lamp caused the car to catch fire."

This bullying Sleat had caught him again. What fiends these lawyers were.

". . . petrol dripping from carburettor . . ."

He felt he was going to faint, the odious Sleat sounded a long way off.

"This railway friend of yours . . . "

He heard his tormentor through layers of cotton-wool as if he was talking at the end of a very long tunnel. Some of the words were so faint he couldn't quite catch them, something about "held you by the arm."

"Yes," Dennis muttered faintly. "He held me by the arm."

"Bound up your head. What did he use to bind up your head?"

Dennis didn't know, he only knew his head had been bound up. What was he telling him now?—it sounded so distant down the tunnel. Oh, it was his own handkerchief the man used. Well, how could he be expected to remember that. What did the man say to him? Ah yes, they had came to the catch sentence Sir Charles didn't want him to say—no, he must not tell Sleat that.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Sleat was saying coaxingly.

Dennis in a dreamy way, was sure that was the last thing in the world Mr. Sleat wanted to do—help him—help anybody. He wouldn't help a blind man! Blind? Oh yes, that's why he mustn't tell him.

"But surely you can remember?" the voice of the Crown enquired, irritated, "you remember so much. You told us he kept on telling you this thing."

Had he, Dennis, said that or had this Sleat concocted it to trap him. It was true anyway; the man had told him over and over again.

"Or perhaps, that was another of your little misunderstandings; perhaps you were so dr——"

Thank heavens the coroner was pulling him up, giving this bully a raspberry. Rather a decent man, the coroner,

very fair, trying to get to the bottom of the whole thing.

Sleat was politer now, apologising if he had said anything which might detract from the character of an officer and a gentleman.

What rot! I bet he doesn't care twopence. Sorry indeed! A wave of nausea came over Dennis, the far-off feeling returned. He saw his questioner in a haze, fidgeting with his tie. He noticed Sir Charles watching him anxiously. There was a tenseness in the court.

"You don't wish to answer my question?"

"No," Dennis stated, pulling himself back, "I don't."

Mr. Sleat put his finger inside his ear and twisted it round. He made a false glaring grin. "It is doubtless something disreputable you wish to conceal."

Dennis felt angry, he would like to have gone over and boxed the little man's ears.

"How can it be disreputable? I didn't say anything—it was he, this railway chap, who said it."

Mr. Sleat twisted his finger inside his ear again.

"If there's nothing wrong about it why don't you tell us?"

Dennis remained silent, the room swaying gently round him like the gentle roll of an anchored sailing boat.

"You realise that you have caused the death——"

"Shut up!" Dennis shouted angrily. "Shut up you——"

The coroner intervened. "Mr. Pask, you must not use expressions like this here—confine yourself to the point and try and answer Mr. Sleat as accurately as you can."

Dennis swayed round towards the coroner. "I am sorry, sir, but he has no right to bait me."

The coroner ignored this remark and turning to Mr. Sleat spoke firmly, "You have had your witness for nearly two hours . . ."

Dennis lost his grip again, there was a high frequency note sizzling in his ears.

". . . my last question, positively my last."

Dennis brightened. Mr. Sleat seemed to have approached nearer down the tunnel. Well, why go on clearing your throat? Spit it out, get it over and done with.

'I bet,' thought Dennis, 'this is a real teaser—seems to have teased him. Sir Charles has stopped him asking. He is appealing to the coroner—the coroner says no. Oh, he's putting it another way. I expect they keep chaps like this in hell to break in the new boys. No, he can't ask it that way either. It must be a sort of game this law. All he wants to know is what that railway man told me and they won't let him ask because he can't frame it the proper way. Poor little Sleat! he must be a lousy lawyer really, not to be able to ask a simple question like that. I'll tell him. Everybody's dying to hear, anyway.'

Dennis leant over towards the worried little ferret of a man.

"Don't worry, Mr. Sleat, I will tell you. There's no harm in you knowing, but it's really nothing much. I would have told you before but Sir—but somebody said I wasn't to. The railway chap kept saying 'Don't tell them you were drunk.' That's all. I . . ."

But Dennis had fainted.

Sir Charles Porch walked restlessly up and down the committee room where they awaited the jury's decison. They had been away over two hours and the strain was telling on their nerves. A policeman brought in five slopping cups of tea and six limp biscuits. Orina thanked him. Everybody had been so kind and considerate.

Why, Orina wondered, did Dennis go driving blind to the world down the road, and cause all this trouble and expense? She knew she ought to feel sorry for him, but why—why did he have to go out on a drunken party with this poor girl just after he had said he would give the whole thing up? Perhaps it wasn't his fault. He had driven for years—he could hardly have imagined these two cars racing towards him. But perhaps he had. There was no doubt in her mind he had been very tight. And this strange railway employee—had he imagined him also? Why hadn't the other witnesses remembered him? She was sure they were trying to tell the truth. Perhaps they didn't like Dennis because he had shouted at them when they said Babe was

drunk. Perhaps they had deliberately omitted the evidence of the approaching cars, and that other strange witness. The more one thought about it the stranger the whole thing became.

She walked the length of the room with Porch, and at the far end, away from the others, asked him in a low voice, "What do you think about it?"

Sir Charles looked at her; he seemed worried and ill at ease.

"I told Whyte," he asserted, "it was a mistake having me down at a coroner's inquest. I am too well-known, too big. A smaller man would have been more convincing. The jury are prepared to take everything I say lightly because they have made up their minds that I am at the top of my profession and they must beware of me."

He picked his tea-cup off the mantelpiece and sipped it.

He asked Orina, "Can no one make tea properly? It's such a simple thing—boiling water and clean utensils. They always manage to get a taste of something different into it. A flavour of kipper in this tea, for instance. Probably they kept kippers in the caddy at some period."

But Orina asked, "What verdict will they bring in?"

"Verdict!" Sir Charles declared in horror. "My child, this is a court whose powers are simple. They have to find the cause of death—*super visum corporis*—not a very difficult thing to do in this case. The cause of death is a motoring accident. They will probably go much further and attach blame to the driver of the vehicle and the coroner will give a recitation on the evils of alcohol—perhaps mention criminal negligence and bring in a long perambulating rider. He may possibly adjourn the case until the criminal proceedings are over, but the fact remains that however great they think themselves they are primarily a court summoned for the purpose of finding the actual cause of death. Under Scotch Law these things are much less theatrically managed. A gentleman with the mystic title of Procurator Fiscal enquires into the cause of death in a friendly series of personal visits, but here, in England, the thing has grown out of all proportion."

He stooped towards her, suddenly pointing his finger at her.

"When Whyte asked me down here he asked a dozen Press camera men, a host of reporters, a crowd of several thousand to stand outside and gape. I am not sure he has not caused a scoop of the first magnitude. How do you think the 'little man' constructs my appearance as he reads of the case at to-morrow's breakfast table? Can you see his wife devour the details in the Sunday Press—'Sir Charles Porch,' she will say. 'So they had to get him down to try and get him off. He must have been drunk'."

Sir Charles pushed his cup away distastefully.

"What will happen?" Orina asked anxiously.

Porch shrugged. "We will get him off at the Assizes," he answered, "unless, of course, the jury here reads the evidence differently from the way that I do."

"How do you read it then?"

Sir Charles smiled and spread his hands. "I can't make head or tail of it."

"Do you think there was a railway man there?"

"I don't know what to think. I know Pask believes he was there, and I am sure also that the other witnesses do not. I have searched all the railway stations in the district and can't find him. If he exists at all he is probably shy of the court."

"But," Orina broke in, "who 'phoned for the ambulance? That's the strangest part of the whole thing."

"No one did."

"But how did it get there? I mean, somebody must have told them where to go."

"Oh, it's just a muddle, the whole thing. The call came through all right, from a box in Aserfield Road, but nobody at the hospital will admit receiving it. Probably don't wan to go and give evidence. There are so many difficulties. I used every ounce of power I possess to get the inquest as quickly as possible before a hundred more witnesses appeared. I know these motoring cases. If they are left a week the whole district come forward as eye-witnesses. I wish Dennis hadn't mentioned it, these odd pieces of evidence are never constructive."

Stephen Whyte came over and joined them.

"Aren't you going to drink your tea, Porch?"

Sir Charles looked at Stephen dryly. "It was very kindly meant, but at my time of life my palate is too important a matter to jeopardise lightly."

Stephen looked at him. He had always liked Porch. It was kind, too, coming down to the inquest—the country's most distinguished barrister.

"I must thank you," he said, "for all you have done."

"Done!" Sir Charles snapped dryly. "All I have done! I tell you, Whyte, I am ashamed of myself. I thought I was a bigger man. I thought I took my profession seriously, honourably, and what do I find?"

They watched him, waiting to know what he had found.

"I find I am cheap and nasty, I use tricks I would scorn in others, twist and browbeat genuine witnesses and for what end? To betray the trust you have shown in me, the trust of an old and tried friend."

"But you haven't betrayed anything. I thought you were damned good with the old deaf boy."

"The coroner," Sir Charles replied deliberately, "is an honourable man, only trying to discover the truth, and he was ashamed of my tricks."

The distinguished barrister passed his soft delicate hand over his face and turned from them, walking dejectedly towards the window where Dennis stood gazing at the jumble of rooftops opposite. He stood beside him, silent, his wise eyes half-veiled by the drooping lids.

Dennis turned to him at length. His face swathed in bandages, and one arm bound to his side, he did not look a boy any longer, but a resurrected mummy and his eyes, the only visible portion of his face, were like the dead, glazed eyes of a prematurely born calf.

"I am sorry," Dennis said, "if I messed things up, but that fiend went on and on at me, his voice was like a pneumatic hammer beating my brains out."

Sir Charles smiled enigmatically.

"It may have been a good thing telling them, it showed your story was true. Our only chance now is that they

believe about the cars—those approaching cars. While legally you had no right to go across the road, as I said in my speech, it meant certain death to stay where you were or try and climb the bank on your left, so you took the only course open in trying to save yourself and your companion by swerving across the road. It is not as if you were a novice—your clean licence is the greatest hope I have." He broke off and then, "You did see those two cars?" he finished casually.

Now it was all over Sir Charles felt he could put the doubt into words, the doubt that pressed in his mind throughout the inquest.

"I have never stopped seeing them," Dennis cried. "I wake up in the night and see their headlamps tearing towards me while I blow my horn. But they wouldn't move, came rushing on, straight at us. I had to do something, you do believe that. It's just like me to have done the wrong thing."

A policeman came in and told Sir Charles that the jury had returned. Dennis clenched his hands, determined to take it gamely whatever the verdict. Mrs. Pask whispered to Orina, huskily, "I'll wait here. I can't go in. Come back and tell me."

She was left alone in the lonely room. She had been alone all her life. The bitter thing was that this case, coupled with Ella's luncheon party, would break her in the small circle she had climbed into.

Dennis! what could they do to him? Her knowledge of the law was the vaguest. Could they put him in gaol? I suppose they will. She had never had any doubts that Dennis was drunk. 'I am a bad mother. I suppose it is that I don't feel things as other people. do. I should be making a great fuss now about my son, crying perhaps. I suppose I should have looked after him more, told him he mustn't drink.' Did it really matter—all this mother's advice? Boys alway thought they knew best, would have to find out down the troublesome road of personal experience.

She gazed round the room at the leather-covered table with its uninviting water bottle and glass. 'I expect they have had hundreds of meetings here, long tedious meetings. Per-

haps I should have done more about Dennis, but until he left school he was rather a bore, he never could find anything to do in the holidays. Stephen used to look after him a lot. He should have done more for him.'

She heard somebody coming down the corridor. A door had opened somewhere and there was a burst of sound, a babble of voices. A strange thing happened to Constance as she waited. For the few seconds it took the footsteps to reach the door an icy coldness came over her, as if she had walked from hot sun into the interior of a refrigerator. Her knees shook together and her hands trembled, her breath came out in a long-trembling sigh, leaving her mouth dry and parched. Orina came into the room. Mrs. Pask knew that if Dennis went to gaol she was finished socially.

"Dennis," she asked. "What have they done to him?"

Orina waved her bag as she advanced towards the chair where Mrs. Pask sat, unable to ask anything further. She put her arms round Constance and drew the hard, starved body towards her, embracing her with her soft supple one. She raised the veil that covered the orange-blobbed cheeks and pressed her cheek against the make-up-covered bony structure. It was years, if ever, that anything like this had happened to Mrs. Pask. She wished suddenly that she had had a daughter, something one could love. She didn't worry any more about Dennis.

"It's all right. They have exonerated him from all blame. Sir Charles says they can't do any more about it, although the police may bring a charge against him for dangerous driving, but he doesn't think they will. Some technical point he has discovered. Here they come!"

Dennis marched through the open door; those eyes—tortured eyes—peering before him out of the bandages. He passed Orina and his mother and went back to the window where he had stood before, gazing out through the dirty panes at the rooftops and the distant hoarding covered with garish posters, less garish now that the evening light was softening the dreary view.

Mrs. Pask and Orina rose and went to him, catching him one on each side.

"Dennis," Orina murmured. "I am so glad. It is wonderful, darling."

But he shook them off roughly. "Can't you see I want to be left alone. Don't touch me—leave me."

He strode from them to the fireplace where Sir Charles's unfinished cup of tea stood chilled and cold on the mantelpiece.

A sergeant approached, informing him kindly, "Now, sir, we can get you out where the crowd can't see you."

"See me?" Dennis shouted. "Why shouldn't they see me! I am not afraid of them. They think I am a murderer. They're right. I am!" He dived through the room, pushing restraining hands away. "Let me go, do you hear! All of you!"

Orina followed him, down the corridor, down the stone stairs to where a policeman guarded the door of the main entrance.

"Let me through!"

"Sorry, sir, the sergeant's orders you can't pass."

"But I have seen the sergeant, and he knows. It's a free country—I can go where I like."

The policeman stood back and Dennis stepped through the doorway, Orina behind him. He stood at the top of a short flight of steps; below him, and on all sides, a vast crowd of people. They stared at the tall bandaged figure and the slim girl beside him. There was a murmur, "There he is!" Then a lull in which a wit from the centre shouted, "He's dead but he won't lie down!" Not an inapt summary of the situation and a wave of laughter swept through the gathering. A woman near the front shouted in a high-pitched scream, "Drunken murderer!" and this taunt unleashed the pent-up feelings of a great mass of the crowd into a low angry howl. The bottom of the steps was hemmed closely by solid humanity. The policeman was right, it was practically impossible to get out this way.

Orina stepped forward and in her pleasing voice spoke to them. They silenced, not sure who the girl was, or what connection she had with the affair. "Give us a break," she said sweetly, in the American film language they could understand.

There was a grunt of approval and, seizing the favourable opportunity, they walked down the steps and without molestation passed through the crowd.

3

MONDAY, JUNE 12TH

ORINA twisted her skirt straight, pulled up the zips. Then she unjammed the cupboard to find her short coat. It smelt strongly of camphor. She smelt again. Something came back to her vividly, that hunt ball sitting out.

"BALDY!" she shouted.

"Heavens! what's up now?"

"Baldy, Baldy!" Orina cried, jumping round the room. "I've got it." She sat down beside Betty on the bed. "Look here, the whole thing about this baby is that you aren't married?"

"Yes."

"If you got a husband you wouldn't mind?"

"No, it would get me out."

"Right. I know a man who is keen to get married."

"What's he like?"

"Oh, he's rather sweet. He is retired from something—India Army or Burma forests, or one of those things, and he has a nice house in the country, near us actually. Hunts in the winter and golfs and gardens in the summer. He hasn't married because, I suppose, he was busy pig-sticking at Poonah or something and when he came home and settled down and got all fitted in, he thought he would dot the eye by getting a wife. Now, I don't expect that would be so difficult, but he doesn't want to marry a middle-aged person, he wants a girl—preferably one who likes the things he likes, who is Pukka, talks King's Lingo as he would say."

"Yes, I see that, but why a girl?"

"Oh that's easy. He wants to keep young and have young up-to-date friends and go to parties with them and have some fun. I see his point, but the trouble is the sort of girl he wants normally wouldn't marry him. Do you get me? Now, I promised to act agent for him. I have a sort of roving

commission to find a suitable mate and I've got him the ideal girl."

Betty looked at Orina questioningly. "You aren't kidding me, trying to jolly me up?"

"No, honest."

"But wouldn't he jib at this business?"

"Yes, that's a point. I think if you left him to me I could sell you—kid and all."

"But he might be frightful."

"Well, if he beats you or is unfaithful, you can get a divorce, but it lets you out, doesn't it?"

(*a*) ORINA MEETS BALDY

"Sweet-peas never really got a start. I regret very much that I did not water them in the early stages, but every day I thought it bound to rain, but no! only dry, parching winds. I've been neglecting the garden terribly lately, it's the Gymkhana. You have no idea how difficult it is organising and getting the committee together at the meetings, we're so scattered."

Orina enquired, "But I expect you know much more about Gymkhanas than they do, after all your foreign experiences?"

"Yes," he said sadly, "I do, but they don't think so—especially your father, he wants to make it more popular. Quite a number of people follow the hunt now on bicycles, and he wants to have gate opening and hedge climbing competitions for them. He will not see it is quite the wrong idea."

Orina smiled. She knew that once the idea of obstacle bike hunts had got into her father's head no one would talk him out of it.

Baldy wondered if he had said too much. "Of course he's been very useful in many ways—he's so popular, a splendid type. There are few men who carry so much weight in the county."

"I know," Orina said smiling, "he rides about fifteen stone."

"Oh, I didn't meant that," Baldy quavered in dismay. "I mean the record of your family—the oldest in the shire.

Everybody, too, goes to him for advice about agriculture. The Home Farm at Flers is world famous."

Orina looked across the hotel lounge, but she did not see the dull married couple opposite. She saw the Tudor chimneys of her old home, the quaint flagged garden with the high yew hedges and the cut grass lawn that ran down to the stream. She could almost smell the mint at the water's edge, and see the dark green streamers of weed trailing out behind the smooth stones. She saw the shadows of the limes across the yellow gravel drive, and the still mill pool where she had learnt to swim. What fun it had been, how happy those days, what joy the holidays when the small family had become united and run madly through the grounds looking at all the loved places. Why had it ended never to return? For her brother, perhaps; but she had left the nest, must make a new home for herself.

A scene came back to her, a forgotten memory, ghostly like a ray of moonlight in a birch wood. She had been alone with her father, a girl of sixteen, perhaps feeling important sitting at dinner in her mother's place of honour. Her father was drinking his port and she caught his eyes watching her over the bowl of deep red roses. He had said something, so sad, with a break in his voice. "It doesn't matter for girls—they get married, go away, start up Flers on their own." She knew what he meant, the thought ever at the back of his mind that the place must go. They were only just hanging on. All around them the old country, their England, was breaking up into schools, road houses, riband development, a vortex of garish, unreal communities. Their world of bees in the summer limes and moss-covered loose-boxes, of the clang of hammer on anvil and the peaceful sweep of the scythe was fading like the gold streamers at sunset.

"Did you hear?"

She turned with a start. Baldy, of course. There must be something very insignificant about him that her mind always crept away while he talked.

"Did I hear what?"

"Did you hear what I asked you?"

"What did you ask me?"

"Why you wanted me to come up. Was it about some horse? I can't afford——"

"You remember the conversation we had at the hunt ball?"

He looked at her quickly. Orina paused. The thing wasn't so easy as she had supposed. She saw Baldy was surprised, she wondered again if he had really said . . . what had he asked her exactly? "If you find a girl who would be willing to marry an old man you know where to find one," something like that. I'd better make certain before I say too much.

"You did ask me, didn't you?"

She saw at once by his expression what a mistake she had made; it was a proposal to her. What cheek! Why should she want to marry an old hair in the ear, a boring friend of my father's. Heavens! he had touched her gloved hand. Orina knew that she had landed herself in a fix. Now she came to think of it of course no man would ever ask a girl seriously to go and find a wife for him. How idiotic of her not to smell out a proposal. She had had plenty strange ones in the past, but somehow it had never struck her. She supposed it was the worry over Dennis. . . . Fortunately Baldy was still too shaken to speak. Orina collected herself.

"You're a very old friend of my father's and the family, I know he thinks a lot of you, talks about you often. I realised how rotten it must be for you coming back home after all your years abroad, not knowing people and wanting to settle down, have a good time now that you have retired after all your hard work . . . out there," she added, remembering that she didn't know what country Baldy had been operating in. "So I took it as a great honour when you asked me to look round and see if I couldn't spot a likely wife. I knew of course that at your age—I mean in your position, after your distinguished career—you couldn't possibly ask lots of girls and get refused, it would—well, I mean, we couldn't have that happening to our friends." Orina paused. She had thought and talked fast. 'I could probably have thought up something better—maybe I've overdone it.' She plucked up and looked at Baldy. Yes, there was no doubt she had put him on the spot; of course

he didn't want her to go picking out girls for him, but what could he do? Orina guessed that as soon as his brain got going again he would make a clean showdown, say that he had been proposing to her, it was obviously the only thing he could do. Fortunately, however, she had him glamour-struck. He was, moreover, rather decent and sensitive. 'I'll sock him while he's on the ropes,' she thought.

"I have a great friend," she confided, "she's frightfully sweet and—well, I'd do a lot for her——" She broke off. "You must promise me, cross your heart, that you'll never breathe a word to anybody?"

While she waited for his answer she wished she remembered his Christian name, she had no alternative except 'you'.

Baldy nodded. He was still too weak to speak.

"I can't, of course, tell you all the details but she's been treated terribly badly by somebody." It was quite a good moment to pause and let all the implications sink in. 'I am not doing badly,' she thought. 'Proposing for somebody else to a man I hardly know—my diplomat. Uncle Curtis couldn't have done better.'

She smiled helplessly. "I am afraid you have put me in a very awkward position, but I know you're a gentleman and chivalrous and also that you want to get married and well—this girl is absolutely desperate because—well, her boy friend can't marry her and . . ." 'Heavens! it's worked!'

Baldy seemed to have shaken himself clear of all doubts, he looked happy and almost young, excited.

"I promise on my word of honour," he told her, "I won't let the little lady down, I'll marry her." He squeezed her gloved hand.

'P.B.D.', Orina thought (the worst swear at her girls' school) 'Po Bum Draws. I've messed it—he thinks it's me!' For a second she saw no way out, then quickly squeezed his hand.

"I just knew you were immense like that. My friend's name is Betty Trent. She's just one of the really sweet people."

Orina couldn't face Baldy. She knew what world he had was bust. She looked instead at the couple opposite, wondered how they had ever managed to propose. By postcard, she thought.

(*b*) BALDY MEETS BETTY

"I expect you go dancing a lot?"

"Oh, I used to, but as one gets older it's rather silly, don't you think? I simply can't stand young men, they're so boring. I think a man must age before he has any appeal—like wine."

No, it was no good. She would go on this way the whole time till they were married. I could have had this years ago. Almost forgotten faces floated before his brain with an accompaniment of the chink of ice on glass, the creak of punkas, hum of electric fans, the blue shadow of verandahs, the smell of the bazaar and the taste of a gin sling.

Baldy shut his mind to these things. I will keep my word. The whole thing's crazy, but I won't draw back now. He turned over in his mind a suitable opening but none came. It is not really very easy for a man over fifty to propose marriage for the first time to a girl he has never met before, doesn't like, and is expecting a baby to an unknown father.

Betty had started a new hare, he jerked his mind back to her questions.

"Do you know Harry Parvane? He hunts near you with the Whitefield."

No, Baldy didn't, and was told he was very funny.

"Do you know the Wenthals? They have a place near Mandering."

Baldy was afraid he didn't.

"What about Joyce Frome?—goes very well—used to be in our shop."

Baldy was afraid even Joyce Frome was unknown to him.

They fell back on Orina and her father and brother—nobody ever mentioned Lady Flers she was totally eclipsed by her brilliant family.

On the common ground of Orina and her family the extreme edge wore off the conversation and Betty launched into an "awfully funny story". "We were going down to the Tattoo

the other day and just outside Sunningdale a horrible little man in a red sports car . . ."

Baldy, under cover of the frightfully funny story, tried to collect his thoughts. He knew well that he bored people and now he, himself, was bored. An idea struck him. She might refuse him. If he proposed suddenly, without context, she could scarcely accept him and he would have fulfilled his agreement to Orina and could return quietly to his garden and committee and banish for ever these dreams of his. It was an idea. Orina, who had dazzled him into this, had not specified how he should propose.

On the impulse of the moment he broke in. "Excuse me," he said abruptly, cutting rudely into the "awfully funny story", " "excuse me, but will you marry me?"

Betty stalled in the middle of a sentence. The proposal had come out casually, like a request for a box of matches. She threw herself back on the cushions. Lazy by nature the effort of the concentrated charm of the last half hour had been a strain, now she could relax, give up trying. "It was kind of you to ask me, but it doesn't matter. Really, I'll get out some other way."

For the first time in her life she wasn't deliberately trying to put herself over with a man. Baldy watched her, puzzling whether it was some new form of attack.

"She is a peculiar girl, Orina Flers."

"Yes, she's extraordinary. I wish I had never met her."

"Really? But I thought you were such friends."

"No, I haven't got any friends—nobody likes me for myself. Orina only stands me for what she can get out of it and—and this other chap, you know, he's the same. I threw myself at him and he just helped himself. One can't blame him, really. I didn't tell Orina, but he's not even married. He could marry me if he wanted to."

"But it's disgraceful. The man should be hounded out of decent society."

"Oh, he doesn't know. I haven't told him. I can't. I talked pretty big, practically jumped into his bed. I haven't the nerve to go to him now—he would hate me so."

Betty stretched out and found a cigarette in the box near her. She put it in her mouth but didn't light it.

"People never look at me, it's Orina all the time. I thought as she was so attractive if I palled up with her I would get to know all the nicest young men. If you only knew the misery of it, always sitting in the back seat, talking to young men for hours about Orina, hearing them tell me over and over again how wonderful she is, asking me what they can do to make her like them. Hours and hours of it! Hundreds of different young men! No wonder I hate Orina, loathe the sight of her——"

"But," Baldy interrupted, "does she know this—how unhappy you are?"

"Oh, she tries to be decent, but when you have everything anybody could be decent couldn't they? She's found me a few young men but they only tolerate me because of her. If I'd been on my own it would have been different." Betty threw the cigarette away still unlit, and stared moodily in front of her. "If, for instance, *we* had met in the ordinary way without her you might have quite liked me, but as soon as she told me about you I knew it was Orina you were after."

Baldy was interested. "Supposing we had met in the ordinary way, then *you* might have quite liked me."

"Yes," Betty said simply, "quite."

She wondered at herself, how her reserve, all the petrifying shyness had suddenly dropped from her. She had never spoken as naturally to any man before, never stared so critically at anyone.

"No, I think you're rather attractive—a few blackheads taken out, and that hair in your ears annoys me. It was true what I said. I would rather marry an older man, I have seen enough of good-looking boys."

"You're quite right," Baldy declared, but he had harked back to Orina. "She is wonderful, but sort of too much, and I think she's very conceited also."

"No," Betty said lazily, "she's too clever to be conceited. Her trouble is she doesn't know what she wants. I think all the Flers are a little bats. All these old families start

to go queer in time. Orina's very odd. She used to have a maid, a creature she fished out of the gutter, a dreadful girl. They called each other by their Christian names. It was horrible. I sacked her when Orina was away."

"You were quite right," said Baldy, horrified.

"I don't think there was anything really wrong about it, but it was so strange."

"Orina does sound very odd. Do you know," Baldy supplied in his turn, "her father wants to have a bicycle obstacle race at the Gymkhana—did you ever hear anything like it! I think he's going crazy. I said, 'Surely you don't want people bicycling after hounds, and he said they would do far less damage than lots of people who ride after them; and he a member of the Hunt Committee!"

"I thought the Flers were supposed to be so keen on horses?"

"They have nearly ruined themselves over them. When Orina used to hunt down with us she was a definite menace, riding half-broken horses and coping them to all the loca boys. I believe they made a lot of money out of it in the winter, but she and her brother lost every penny racing in the summer. Nobody dare breathe a word against the Flers. But it's all changed now, since they have gone. The boxes are empty. Between you and me I think the family is about finished. The little girl's quite different, less wild, takes after her mother."

Baldy stopped. He had not realised before that he had grievances against the Flers. In local eyes they could do no wrong. Now he began to wonder whether these old English families weren't better away, riding rough-shod over everyone, not caring what people thought of them, pally with the working-classes and despising the middle classes, without proper self-control, saying exactly what they thought, abhorring artificiality.

He had been brought up in that school himself, but his years abroad and the constant contact with commerce had shown him the faults in his own class. But he could not lose his love of sport—that heritage from mediaeval days that linked him up with the Flers, that made him

shudder when he saw in the old man signs of change, signs of giving up those sports that had held the land together through the centuries, that had made Britain the most ill-used agricultural country in the world, but had given them that freedom of mind and that amazing spirit of fair play and comradeship that no other country could understand.

He said aloud, "You would be happy in the country," and added with that frankness that had sprung up between them, "I don't think you can be very happy here in London."

"But," Betty said surprised, "wouldn't you mind about . . ."

She was shy. Suddenly she realised it wasn't natural for her to be frank, her frankness came from her contact with Orina, whose vital personality had overshadowed her for so long that in the end she had absorbed it, had picked up Orina's way of not draping veils over things, her complete disregard for all the carefully-built-up etiquette. Surely it was unattractive to be as blunt as Orina was? Surely she overdid this absence of swank? It was right for people to have sentiment, be proud of their family, but when people came to their tiny flat Orina would not show off their few treasures. She hardly ever mentioned her home or her family, and when she did it was in a ribald manner, as the mortgaged shed, or Sir Cerist as Old Man Flers. Betty had absorbed all this as natural, the proper thing to do. If Orina had any sentiment she never showed it. Betty remembered Joyce letting out a yell as she caught her fingers in the door. Without feeling the least bit sorry about the accident she had used age-old formulas of comfort, but Orina had merely remarked "I thought by the noise you had been bitten by a rat."

"I have some photos of my mother and our home, would you like to see them?" Betty asked.

"Yes, I would love to," Baldy replied, really interested. His life abroad had accustomed him to viewing home snaps at all hours and places.

This was a breakaway from Orina's unconscious training. Orina despised all souvenirs or family photographs.

Baldy became polite over the cock-eyed and under-exposed snaps. 'Shall I tell him the truth?' Betty wondered. But the complex that had eaten into her was too powerful. 'Besides,' she reflected, 'it works. Nobody has ever taken so much interest in me before.'

The moment had passed, slipped into a dump of moments. Months later, Betty was glad she had not told him the truth. It gave her an opportunity to hurt the person she hated most in the world.

4

TUESDAY, JUNE 20TH

"How do you like me now with my bandages off?"

Orina walked towards Dennis and slipped her arm round his waist. She stood so she could not see the face, terribly ugly with its great scars.

"They will heal in time, just leave white marks. I don't mind, looks don't count for much in the long run."

"Not in the long run," Dennis answered strangely; bending forward, kissed the top of her head, rubbing his lips backwards and forwards in the gold-red curls for the first time since they became engaged.

Orina didn't mind as long as she didn't see his face. She closed her eyes and pulled his head down to hers and kissed him on the ear. With his hands on her shoulders he pushed her gently to arm's length, holding her there, looking at her.

"Open your eyes."

She opened her eyes but could not raise them to his face. She looked at his brightly coloured Dasher tie, and the thin white stripes on his grey flannel suit—anywhere but at his face. Then she went back to the shelter of his arms, and after resting there a moment, plucked up courage and raised her eyes unflinchingly to the face torn criss-cross by shallow red furrows.

"It didn't take long to get the bandages off."

"No, I suppose I heal quickly."

"Hold me tight, Dennis. Kiss me."

He clasped her to him and kissed the full soft mouth and she kissed him back, squeezing herself tight against his strong body.

They separated again and Orina remarked, "I like your carnation. Does it smell?" She smelt. "Mm, goodie, isn't it?"

Dennis smiled, he caught her hand and, raising it, looked thoughtfully at the engagement ring. He made no comment, merely taking it off.

He handed the ring back. "I hope you will keep it as a souvenir."

"Souvenir?"

Dennis turned from her and walked across the fawn carpet to the window of the flat.

"As a souvenir of your silly engagement."

"But Dennis, we're still engaged—nothing's altered. I am the same, I'll stick to you, you know that."

"Yes," Dennis said reflectively, "I expect you would, but I'm not going to let you. It's all over. I am going abroad—Valupez. They are fed up with me in the regiment—after all this."

"Well I'll go with you."

"No you won't, I don't want you any more."

"Don't want me?"

"I know it seems strange, after all the times I proposed, but—— Oh, I can't explain. You wouldn't understand."

"Yes, Dennis, I would. Tell me."

Dennis walked back from the window and seated himself on the arm of the sofa.

"It just came to me suddenly that the only person I have ever loved was Babe. I suppose I should have known that while she was alive, but that ghastly motor smash, when I saw the car in flames, great roaring flames, I knew I had to get her out some way, that I loved her more than anything else. And when I found that she was . . ." He broke off. "I've had terrible nightmares ever since. I dream that I am dead out in some lonely place lying rotting in the sun, and Babe's there trying to keep the birds away from me, great black brutes. They want to come and peck out my eyes. It's ghastly. Although I'm dead the hair on my face keeps growing. I simply can't bear it. That's why I don't want to marry. I can't. You see, I want to get away out

of it all. I don't want to see you or Stephen or anybody again."

Orina shuddered. There was something so gruesome about Dennis's nightmare. She had never realised before that he was deep enough to feel like this.

"Dennis, couldn't I help you to shake yourself clear of all this? They tell me I have charm."

Dennis moved from the edge of the sofa and sat down beside her. He looked at her and she looked back at the face that had once been so handsome. She shuddered again. Any kind of disfigurement gave her creeps and Dennis's face was revolting with the network of vivid gashes. He saw her shudder and laughed.

"Even now," he said, "I don't understand you. I understood Babe. I am very simple, you know, and Babe was simple. She didn't expect much from life, just lived for the moment. She was rough, of course, but had been brought up in a hard school. She taught me a lot. I was rather pleased with myself till I got to know her. She knocked all the rot out of me. But you, Orina, are so complex, you change the whole time. But underneath it all you're hard, I don't think you have any real emotions. It's not in you to love people, to throw away everything in the world for them. You're cold-blooded, calculating. You know just how lovely you are, how smart, and you secretly look on everybody else in the world as boobs. Perhaps you're right." He shrugged and saw her shiver again with loathing at the sight of his gashed face. A red wave of fury swept over him. "But now I know you better I don't like you, want you any more."

Orina looked at Dennis with an expressionless face, but tears welled out of her blue eyes and splashed down on her bare neck. They came so quietly Dennis did not see them. He looked at her small feet, at the long thin legs, following with his eye the sweeping curve that led up to where her skirt was rucked and showed a frill of lace. As he looked at the small knees the anger changed to passion and he stretched out his hand and caught hers, holding it roughly in his grasp. Then he drew her towards him. She came without resistance, limply.

He put his hand on her waist and slowly drew it up her body till it cupped her breast, then slipping it inside her blouse pushed the brassière away, held the bare flesh.

Orina stared up at Dennis's face, the scarred, tortured face with a fiery gleam in the eyes—no longer the brown spaniel eyes she had known. He bent down and kissed her fiercely on the mouth. She made no resistance but drew in her breath and a cold shiver ran through her body. He kissed her again and she felt his other hand gently rubbing her thigh. He noticed the tears streaming down her face, how utterly miserable she looked, and of a sudden shoved her roughly away.

"You cold-blooded little fish, you're worse than any tart. All those looks and smiles, and you have as much feeling as a mushroom."

A desire to hit Dennis right across the sneering mouth came over Orina. This silly boy, what did he know of her? She didn't hate him but despised him. When he had come in a few minutes before she had got very near to loving him, a love born of pity and an admiration of his courage. But she remained silent, gazing at the fawn carpet.

Dennis jumped up and paced the room. "Do you girls keep any drink here?" he enquired at length.

"I think," Orina answered, "you will find half a bottle of sherry in the kitchen."

Dennis marched off.

"No," Orina called, "you're going the wrong way, that's my bedroom."

Dennis looked round the room. So this was the bedroom of the great Orina Flers, the girl he had always thought so wonderful. Well, he knew what she was now; a cheap little gold digger, on the catch for what she could get. He understood her now, thank God, before it was too late. Cold-blooded little beast!

Orina came in and stood between him and the dressing-table. Putting her hand behind her she shut up the leather-framed photograph which stood there, and shoved it out of sight.

"Any good at mending cupboard doors?" she asked.

"What's wrong with it?" Dennis answered, still cross, looking at the wardrobe.

"It won't stay shut."

"Well, jam it up with something."

"I've been doing that for years."

He tinkered about with the door, opening and shutting it.

"All this wants is the hinge set back. Got a screw-driver?"

"I think so, in the kitchen. We use it for breaking ice."

"You would," Dennis replied, his good humour returning.

They went together to the microscopic kitchen.

"Here's the sherry."

Orina produced a bottle from the cupboard. Dennis poured it out into a glass.

"Half full? Why, there's not a tumbler in it."

Dennis put the empty glass down and took the screwdriver from her.

"It's pretty rusty." He liked tools well-kept and used for the purpose they were intended for. "I left the harpoon behind on the island," he remarked inconsequently. "I don't suppose I shall ever see it again."

"We will go back some day, I expect."

"You may, I shall never go back. It was fun," he added retrospectively, then he laughed. "You know that island, the other side, they never landed on?"

"Yes," Orina replied shortly, remembering vividly.

They had returned to the bedroom and Dennis was unscrewing the hinge.

Dennis laughed again. "I sneaked off after lunch on the last day and tried to swim it."

Orina looked at him sharply. "Did you make it?"

"No, I got into a sort of tide race when I was half-way across. Hold these screws, will you? Had a devil of a job, it was so strong I couldn't get against it and got carried out to sea a long way, then I suppose the tide turned and I managed to get back to the main island. I was about all in—floated most of the way."

"Why do you think you will never go back?"

Dennis was holding a screw in his mouth and answered mushily, "I could go, I expect, but don't want to. It wouldn't be the same. Got anything I can make a hole with?"

"Yes, there's a sort of piercer thing in my nail set. Dennis," she remarked from the dressing-table, "I'm sorry if I've been beastly to you, I didn't mean to lead you up the garden path or anything. I am an awful goose, you know—here's the gadget—one can't sort of turn love on like a tap."

Dennis gimleted out the hole and pressed a screw in with his thumb.

"Look, just take the weight off the door, push it up with your foot. That's right, a little more. Keep still." He screwed the metal home. "I am sorry, Orina; it wasn't your fault. I was beastly. You're not really a gold digger, are you?"

Orina pressed the door with her foot. "Dennis, you know I am not. I feel things just as much as you or anybody else. I've been in love too. I know how you feel about Babe."

"Have you?" Dennis stopped and looked at Orina; he saw her in a new light. "Have you now?"

"Such a silly thing to do, isn't it, especially when the person you love doesn't care for you—I mean, personally."

"Doesn't he?"

"No, not a scrap. To do him justice he has lost the power of caring for anybody much."

"Doesn't he want you at all?"

"Oh yes, he wants to sleep with me, to own me that way, but he doesn't want me for myself. I never show up very well with him, give him the impression I am sort of childish and idiotic, and I'm not really."

Dennis, who a few minutes earlier had thought she was an icy, calculating woman, now in their new friendship declared, "Of course not, you're sweet, one of the sweetest things I know. Have you been in love long?"

"Mm, a goodish time. I have never loved anybody else." Orina paused; she had let out a secret, an inner page of her life no one knew; she had always relied on herself, but suddenly she talked, let out another flash. "Dennis, you mustn't tell anybody about it. I suppose I'm motherly somewhere,

wanted to reform this man, make him love me decently, cleanly. . . . Den, you will think I am terrible—perhaps I am really—but while I've been engaged to you I've been trying to get off with somebody else."

"This tough bloke?"

"No, Den—he's well—could you understand?—he's just always there in my mind, under my skin. I know it's hopeless, I know he's got me beat, but what's so rotten is I know whoever I was married to or whatever happened, he's only got to ask me and I'd go anywhere, leave anything." Orina stopped. "I don't know why I've told you all this. This other man—the new one—well, I just want him because I know he's decent, reliable, would make a good husband."

"Darling," Dennis enquired, "I don't mind now a scrap, but do tell me for fun why you accepted me that night—you didn't like me, I knew you didn't all along."

Orina threw him a cigarette. "I felt I was getting nowhere and living in a flat like this is sort of too easy. I thought I would end up tarty. I decided I would get married and settle down, and you had been so persistent I felt I ought to give the old customers the first chance. I didn't really mind who I married, I told you fairly at the time."

"Yes," Dennis answered, swinging the cupboard door backwards and forwards to test it. "Yes, you said you were old and a spin."

They both laughed.

"Dennis, catch!" She threw him a box of matches. "Let's go on being pally even though we aren't officially in love any more."

"Yes, rather. We could have a lot of fun together. Now that's all over I'm not frightened any more of you. We get on best as pals. Do you remember that day in the old cottage when——" He paused. "Is Stephen your new man? Yes, of course he is. I remember how hurt you were when he treated you like a child that day." Dennis smiled. "Surely he's much too old for you, you could do better than that." He spoke in a hurt voice, protective. He didn't want his own particular pal to throw herself away.

Orina looked at Dennis and she looked pathetic and sweet.

"I couldn't agree with you more. He's lousy in every way, old womanish, not very good-looking, and my! is he prosy. But I just happen to know he is the perfect husband. You have made a splendid job of the door." She swung it half-open and it balanced swimmingly. "I shall be sorry to leave the old flat."

"Leave?" Dennis queried, surprised.

"Yes, Betty's married."

"Married?"

"Yes, I forgot to tell you, and Lady Forton has decided to close down Mon Chapeau and we're no longer engaged. Everything's come to an end at once."

"What are you going to do?"

"Go back to the tumble-down shack, I suppose; it seems young to retire. I'm only twenty-three, I was born in Fifinella's year—you were Pommern. I can tell anybody the Derby winner of their year. Betty is Gainsborough, Joyce is Pommern, Stephen is Volodoevski. Dave Hepburn questioned me a whole afternoon on the subject and never caught me out once—he is St. Amant." She paused and added reflectively, "I haven't thought about racing for weeks, now I come to think of it. We have quite a lot of local meetings round us. It won't be so bad retiring really. The only person I am sorry for is Mac. She has strained at this blasted shop, hours overtime she has put in it, and got it so it's just paying, and now this tiresome woman has to discover the South of France and shuts up the whole business."

"Why don't you run it yourself? You could, and make a big hit."

"I've thought of that." She took Dennis's arm and they walked into the living-room, talking animatedly. "But where would I get the bees from, as Joyce calls money?"

"What about your fancy man?"

"Dennis," Orina said laughing, "if we're going to keep this great friendship intact you must cut out the word 'fancy man'—it implies a great deal more than the circs. warrant. I suppose I shouldn't tell you, but now we've given up being engaged I don't think it matters. I made a couple of passes at Stephen."

Dennis laughed. "Did you?" He looked at her. "I didn't think you ever made passes at anybody."

"Neither did I, but I did. I wasn't very good at it. The first time he kissed me in the moonlight, and it was rather fun, but he spoilt it at once by saying he was sorry."

"The cad," Dennis said resentfully, but without any jealousy.

"Well, I made a pass at him on the top of one of the local mountains and just as things were getting good that trawler came in. So it was something always happened at the wrong moment. Finally I got angry and sloshed him."

"Sloshed him?"

"Yes, hit him as hard as I could. It wasn't a very good line, he has hardly spoken to me since." She looked enquiringly at Dennis. "Do you think he would put up the money?"

"I am sure he would, he loves gambling."

"Dennis, will you come with me when I ask him?"

"No, you could talk the propeller off an aeroplane. You go."

Orina considered a moment. "It's worth a trial. Dennis, are you doing anything to-night?"

"Nothing special."

"Shall we go and eat something and flick afterwards? There's a picture I want specially to see—they say it's a scream."

"Darling, I'd love to."

"Well, hold on a sec and I'll get washed up. There's our school magazine if you want entertaining literature."

She dashed off and Dennis sat down on the sofa, wondering how the afternoon could have ended the way it had. What was Orina really like? Was she bluffing half the time? How had she managed to talk him round so they ended friends, great friends? In fact, he liked her now more than he ever had. She banished from his mind Babe and those terrible nightmares. Perhaps it was the sherry.

"I am damned if I know," he said to her as they left the flat, "whether you have been kidding me or I have been kidding myself."

5

ORINA GOES TO STEPHEN

"YOU are wondering why I have come?"

"No, as a matter of fact I wasn't. I thought you would come."

"Why?"

"Well, I ran into Forton the other day and he told me his wife had given up that hat shop, said you were talking of taking it on yourself."

"I see. So you guessed I would come round and ask you to finance it."

"Exactly, and you have."

There was a pause. Orina had not expected the interview to go on such bald lines, she had wanted to explain her motives first.

She remarked at random, "Well, I must do something."

Stephen looked at her and his glance was not friendly. "I somehow thought you would have stuck to Dennis."

So he thought she had thrown him over, he despised her.

"I did try and stick to him."

Stephen looked at her coldly. "It's nothing to do with me, and you are entitled to do anything you like—it's a free country."

He walked over to a glazed bookshelf and scanned the volumes casually. Orina followed him.

"I didn't throw him over, he threw me."

Stephen did not turn round but replied over his shoulder, "I don't blame you, he wasn't a nice sight. I saw him this morning."

"Didn't he tell you that he had called it off?"

"We didn't discuss it, he is a sick man, a very sick man. I am worried about him. He wants to go and do silly things. I can't make up my mind whether it would be best for him to go. If he stayed on here there's no telling what may happen—he has always drunk too much, and——"

Orina pushed Stephen round so that he faced her. "Do look at me, believe me; I didn't throw him over. I

didn't walk out on him. It was Dennis. He doesn't love me, he loved that other girl. Oh Stephen, you must believe me." She was holding him now by the lapels of his jacket.

Stephen stood stern, relentless, looking down at her.

"I've never walked out on anything, Stephen, you do believe me, it's not my nature; when I agree to things I stick to them."

Stephen smiled down at her. "I believe you. Dennis threw you over."

Orina was relieved, but there was still a strange hardness in Stephen's voice. She gazed at his face, trying to read the meaning that lay behind the tired eyes.

"Dennis told me during the case that he knew you would stick to him." He paused and smiled again, the same far-off, kindly smile.

"What you think is that Dennis chucked it to let me out, because he knew I would stick to him." She looked at Stephen's highly polished shoes and added so low that he could only just catch the words, "Even though I couldn't bear to look at his face."

Stephen did not answer. She had read his mind correctly. He could not believe Dennis had ever been in love with his little actress friend, he was doing a fine thing. He recalled a fragment of their morning's conversation. Dennis had said, "I don't want to drag her down. You marry her, save her from herself. She is in such a silly mood she will throw herself away on somebody worse than me." Yes, that's what he had said.

Orina moved away from Stephen. She thought to herself, 'I always make a fool of myself before him.'

When she reached the central table where she had laid her bag and gloves she turned round and faced him. "I don't think you understand Dennis at all, I don't think you understand people. You are full of theories how they ought to be and what codes they should have, what high ideals they should follow, but you don't understand the actual human beings themselves."

Stephen came over to her, interested at once. "I have a theory," he said eagerly.

She smiled at his earnest face and going up to him smoothed his hair back. "That we are all living in Hell?" she asked, smiling.

"Yes," he answered, still earnest. "Thousands of devils stalking through the world to destroy it."

Orina looked at him tenderly. "You're too nice a man to believe in such things, think about your filly winning the Oaks next year. Don't worry so much about other people, they don't worry about you. But I am here strictly on business." She went to the table and tapped her bag. "I have here a resume of the transactions of Mon Chapeau and I believe I can show you that it has got distinct possibilities. We have built up considerable good-will, and if expenses were reduced in certain ways, which I will show you, we could be showing a good profit right now."

The butler came in with the tea things and Orina busied herself sorting out the papers from her bag while he laid the table.

When he had gone Stephen asked, "But why do you want to go into all this? You have a lovely home, it's no sort of life for a girl like you."

"You don't understand. It would be such a failure going home for good, it would mean I had sort of given up trying. I couldn't go back to tennis parties and Girl Guiding; I am too old."

Stephen laughed. "You're not old. I don't see how you mean failed. Failed at what? You didn't come up to London to make a fortune or sell hats, did you? Just to have a good time?"

"You don't understand. My family are very hard up. These things aren't said in so many words, but the general idea was that I should get married."

"But there are, surely, boys round your home?"

She walked over to the tea table and started to pour out tea. Yes, it was true, there were boys at home. Actually it wasn't anything to do with boys. She had to leave the nest; everything had to be sacrificed for Malmsey.

"I have a kid sister coming on. Flers can't carry weight. We're fond of the old shed and we'd all do a lot to keep it going."

"I see," Stephen answered, "that's why you want to

take over this hat thing, so you can go about and meet possible people."

"Two lumps?"

"Thanks."

"Do you allow me any good motives? For instance, isn't it possible that I am sorry for Miss Roberts, after all her work slaving at the blessed thing, being chucked out just as it's beginning to pay, all through her efforts?"

"Yes," Stephen said, stirring his tea, "there may be something in that. But the main idea is still that you can be independent to try and get married."

Orina thought of many answers. She bent a piece of bread and butter over into a sandwich and bit a piece out.

"Is it not natural for a girl to want to get married then?"

"Perfectly. I quite agree. But this intensive hunting annoys me. I can't see why you shouldn't go home, where you have everything a girl could want, and probably somebody will turn up at the right time and——"

"Oh, stop it, do you hear! Stop it! Don't keep nagging away at me—you're not my father. I've come to ask you if you will back the shop. It's business. You will make more money out of it than all your Stock Exchange things. Are you or not? Yes or no, and then I can get out and never see you again."

She found her hand was trembling and turned away from him so he should not see how upset she was.

"No," he said firmly. "I'm sorry, but I won't put up a penny."

"Well, that's that." She went to the table and with unsteady hands shoved the papers back in her bag. "That's that. Out of curiosity, may I ask why?"

"Because I don't want to have my wife working in a shop," he replied.

Orina returned to the tea table. What an extraordinary man Stephen was! Yet she liked the firm way he had said it. There were no bubbles to burst. They had just seen each other at their worst, and on the Isles they had sensed, too, the physical passion that awaited them. Was there any more in marriage than this? she wondered; a little understanding, a little passion?

She sipped abstractedly the half-finished tea. "Even if you didn't want me to work in it, couldn't you run it for Miss Roberts? Cut out all the dead wood and get some smart sales girls, I am sure you would get your money back."

"There might be something in that. I will see this Miss Roberts on Monday and go into the whole thing." He smiled at her kindly. "You won't expect me to alter my bachelor ways, will you?"

"Oh no, rather not, you are far too old and set to alter. I forgot to thank you for doing me the honour. I call it very decent, sporting too really, as it will put you out a lot." She walked over to him and took his empty cup. "Same again? Two lumps, isn't it? I'll try and remember all those little details. Two lumps and two beds—it should be easy. Malmsey, my brother, will be frightfully pleased. He always hoped I would marry a rich man he could touch. And the pater will be tickled. My ma is the only one of the family who will have regrets; she's very old world, you know, love in a cottage and things."

"I thought you would be pleased," Stephen said. The proposal had slipped out unconsciously, he had been merely speaking his thoughts. He had meant to marry Orina, but not in this frightfully business, unromantic manner; to sweep her off her feet, make love to her.

He had realised that he wanted her on the Isles and knew with a worldly insight she didn't credit him with that she, Orina, wanted him too. But Dennis had stood in the way. He had been glad when he heard the engagement was over, but afterwards doubts came creeping into that groping brain of his. He thought, Dennis gave her a chance to get out and she took it. She knew, all right, he was only doing the gentlemanly thing. She wants to marry me so that I can help her family. I will, but I'll make it as unpleasant as possible, break that proud nature of hers, humiliate her, make her eat dust so that she will fall from her pedestal and lose her sting. It's the same as breaking a horse or a dog—show your strength, show you're not frightened, then afterwards kindness, love.

Orina carried him over a fresh cup of tea. She looked at

Stephen as she passed the cup. She felt the barrier was down, they would hug each other!

"I suppose it's customary to kiss and that sort of thing on these occasions?" she asked, her lips framing the harsh words tenderly.

"Yes, I believe it is, but, if you remember, we did all that on the Island."

"Of course, how silly of me, I had forgotten. You will see Miss Roberts in the morning, and I will get my trousseau ordered. By the way, could you give me the exact date I start work?"

Stephen set down his cup and went over to the desk calendar, his mouth twitching.

"What about Tuesday, July 11th?"

"Yes, that would suit fine. Tuesday for wealth. It comes in Newmarket week—sure that won't upset your plans?"

"No, it suits me."

"All right then, July 11th. I'll see you at the church."

6

TUESDAY, JULY 11TH

UNCLE ETHNARCH FLERS had lent brother Cerist his London house for the reception.

"Why does she want to get married in such a hurry?" he asked suspiciously.

"You have the lowest mind I've ever met," Sir Cerist Flers answered affably, "but it's quiet in order. Whyte has a grouse moor and wants to get this thing over in plenty of time for the twelfth—it's the only sensible thing I've heard about the fellow."

"Good-bye, Mumsy darling."

"Good-bye dear." Lady Flers lifted her daughter's short black veil and kissed the flushed cheek.

"It wouldn't have happened worse for hats. Look at this one, the brim will catch all the rice that's going."

"I hope you will be happy," Lady Flers remarked doubtfully, looking at Orina.

She had never been able to contact her family. "A litter of wild cats," her husband had described them one day, after Malmsey had organised a moonlight steeplechase, "and the bitches as bad as the toms," he had added in his agricultural manner. She felt now she should give some sort of advice about changing wet feet or household accounts, but knew she would be laughed at. She held on to Orina's sleeve pathetically, it was such a big step in a woman's life, marriage, and her daughter was taking it so lightly.

"I hope you will be happy," she remarked again weakly.

Orina stretched forward her finely shaped hand with the wedding ring and the blood-red nails fastening an old-fashioned diamond brooch that hung loosely on her mother's grey silk front.

"I am marrying the man I love," Orina alleged, smiling. But it didn't sound right; her mother never knew when she was having her leg pulled.

"We hardly know this Stephen Whyte," she mused, "the whole thing has happened so quickly."

Orina bent forward, veil raised, and kissed her mother reassuringly. "Mum, will you do something for me?"

"Of course, dear."

"Send me that recipe of yours for apricot brandy?"

"Yes, of course, dear."

The little request had the desired effect of bringing them nearer together than they had been for years. Her mother put her hand lightly on Orina's shoulder.

"Young people grow up so quick, it seems only yesterday you were a wild tom-boy creature in a man's shirt and shorts."

"It *was* only yesterday," Orina answered, but they talked at cross purposes.

"You will write, dear? You're so bad about writing—they all are. Malmsey never writes."

"Can I come in?" her father asked, entering. His morning coat and cravat looked a little out of date, one couldn't just exactly say why, they were well enough cut and tidy, but the whole appearance was of a society that had gone with the war, an Edwardian memory of white-painted iron-work, pink geraniums and the Empire promenade. He looked

at Orina carefully with the eye of a breeder agonised lest he should note any flaw.

"You'll have to fatten up a bit," he decided at length, and slapped her affectionately on the behind. "Don't you wear any clothes, child? There's rather a nice chap wants to see you—a belated presentation from the Scotch household. I shoved him next door into your mother's room. He tells me," he turned to his wife, whom he often described as the finest listener in Christendom, "he tells me he never uses gut for dry fly, always horsehair. When you come to think of it——"

"Dave!" Orina exclaimed excitedly, and ran from the room.

Her father looked up. "Oh yes!" he exclaimed. "What was I saying? I remember. It doesn't kink the same."

Lady Flers intervened. "She has forgotten her carnation spray. Do you think she will be happy?"

"Trust her," the distinguished-looking man remarked lightly and walked over to a table where a napkin-draped bottle of champagne stood. He poured himself out a glass and, after smelling it critically, took a sip. "Not bad. Try some."

His wife walked over to him, holding the delicate spray of virginal white carnations. "Do you think they will be happy?"

"Yes, I don't see why not. Haven't had much time to talk to this fellow—seemed a bit too interested in the Stock Exchange. Hellish crooks," he muttered, taking another sip. "Juggle round with markets, playing about with money and commodities that don't exist. The ruin of the country. They undermine the security of the honest trader, not a profession for a gentleman. I am not sure it isn't gone a little," he tasted again critically. "Why did the girl drink this stuff? Not the thing at all for a girl." He looked at his wife as if there had been some grave fault in Orina's upbringing. "If she wants jumping powder, to put her nerves right, Green Chartreuse is the stuff—everybody knows that!"

"Oh Dave, I think it's lovely. It was sweet of you."

"And the rest of the staff, too," Dave replied truthfully, his face lit in a broad grin. "I thought you would look

better when you were dressed," he declared approvingly, unconscious of the strangeness of his statement. "They weren't to give you a present at first, not kenning you like they do the master, and I was kind of afraid when they saw the wedding photographs afterwards they would be disappointed. You see," he added apologetically, "I had only seen you in yon wee panties, but by jingo when they see your photie, redded up this way, they'll ken I wasna leing," He shook his head sadly. "But mind you, they'll no admit it. No, not they."

"Have you had some champagne, Dave?"

"Yon stuff!" Hepburn remarked disrespectfully. "Mr. Dennis got me some fine whisky."

He looked uncomfortable, the remark had slipped out from his slightly loosened tongue. He had meant to avoid any mention of Mr. Pask, but Orina appeared not to notice. She looked at the fishing rod and creel.

"I am dying to get it up and have a cast."

"Can you manage dry fly?" Dave enquired.

"To tell you the truth—and I hate to admit it—I've only fished so far with a worm and a float for coarse fish."

"Tut, tut!" Dave replied, aggrieved. "We'll have to put that right. I guessed it though," he added, proud of his powers of deduction; "you asked me one day why I kept a trout fly in my bonnet, d'ye mind?"

Orina nodded.

Dave shook his head reprovingly. "It wasna a trout fly, it was a Jock Scot salmon fly."

They both laughed.

"So I got you a greenheart rod. It was no the expense of a split cane, ye ken—there was plenty of money—but you will find it much easier to learn with."

There was a pause in the conversation. Orina could listen to Dave all day, but knew she ought to go.

"London's larger than I would have thought," he said conversationally. "I was in the Navy during the war and we never got to it," he added, lest it should be imagined that it was in any way an event, this visit to London. "I'd

no say a pound note would go far," he summarised thoughtfully, "and do ye no think it's fearful grubby?"

"I've been searching the place for you, come on!" Betty shouted, rushing in on them.

Orina did not pay any attention. She held out her hand. Dave shook it warmly and, in an undertone so Betty couldn't hear, he told her, "I can see your faither's a fine man." He hesitated, and then added shyly, looking away from her, "You chose right in the end."

"Betty darling, you're drunk as a bat."

"I am not," her friend protested. "Orina, it isn't right to go away in a black dress like that. At your age and the time of year you should have——"

"Shut up," Orina answered, "don't worry me. I haven't had a moment to ask you how are things?"

"Oh, pretty frightful. Your father seems determined to spoil the Gymkhana. We're hardly on speaking terms."

Orina smiled. It had not taken a month to domesticate Betty.

"I hope," she said, "the sweet peas have recovered from the setback."

"Yes," Betty answered, unconscious that she was being ragged, "we've been watering them the last few nights. That reminds me, I must remember to get some slug traps while we're up. Haverhill and Allen would have them?"

"Yes, I am sure they would. Better get some mousetraps, too, while you're about it."

"Yes, that's a good idea."

"Betty, be an angel and go down and see if Stephen's ready waiting so we can sprint through the crush."

She had noticed Dennis's thin, active person bounding up the last flight of stairs towards them. He joined her and they moved into a darker part of the passage. Dennis's face was flushed and the scars were vivid against the pallor of his skin, like a melon in a scarlet net. She held his hand: a sour smell of wine, stale wine, came to her.

"It's good-bye," Dennis said thickly. "I am chucked out of the Army. I'm sailing on the 14th for Valupez."

"Valupez?" she queried.

"Oh, where Stephen's mines are. He's the sole shareholder now."

"Did he send you there?" she asked, a strange quiver of anger in her voice.

"Oh no, I wheedled him to let me go. He was going himself till you altered his plans for him." He chuckled. "How do you like your F.M. now you have him?"

She looked at Dennis, wondering whether he would understand if she told him the truth. No, there wasn't time to explain everything, so she ignored the question.

"Don't go and drink too much, old boy, it doesn't pay."

"How can I help it?" he countered fiercely. "I can't get it out of my mind—that nightmare—myself dead."

"Don't!" Orina cried sharply.

"The hair growing on my dead face."

"Stop it!" she shivered. "For God's sake don't let us get dramatic. I must go." She pulled a carnation out of the spray and gave it him. "Strap it behind your ear when you're on safari."

He took the carnation and looked at her steadfastly as if making a mental picture he could refer to in the future.

She caught hold of his hand again and squeezed it. "Do we end friends?"

He did not return the pressure.

"Come on!" Betty yelled up the stairs.

Dennis gulped but did not answer. To Orina it suddenly seemed desperately important that they should not part without being sure that they still held that boy and girl friendship she had built so carefully. I haven't spoilt his life, I haven't!

"Come on!" shouted Betty, coming heavily up the stairs.

Orina clasped Dennis's hand as hard as she could grip. "Are we pals?"

Why wouldn't he answer? He was looking through her. It gave her the creeps, this X-ray stare. He must tell her before Betty came.

"Oh, Dennis, for the love of Mike tell me you aren't sore with me. I haven't done anything. Don't look that way, darling, it terrifies me."

Dennis spoke at last, he screwed up his eyes. "I don't know. I think I must be going potty or something. Perhaps I'm tight, I've drunk enough."

Betty was nearly at the top step, grumbling and shouting.

Orina made one last desperate effort. "Kiss me, Dennis darling, I can't leave you like this. Tell me you're all right, not angry at anything I've done. Oh God, tell me—say something!"

Dennis stood erect with his eyes screwed up. "I can't say anything, I can't see anything but the hair growing on my dead face."

Betty seized her arm. "Come away, you idiot, he's drunk as an owl. He's been at the buffet the whole time. Come." She pulled Orina down the long flight of stairs.

At the last landing Orina stopped and looked back. She saw Dennis still standing there, his eyes screwed up, looking at nothing. His face seemed drawn and the vivid scars were like great whiplashes.

"Pull yourself together," Betty whispered, amazed. "Here's my hankie. Wipe your eyes quick, you're blubbing. What's come over you? Don't you know yet who you want to marry?"

Stephen caught her hand and they ran through the crowd. Mrs. Pask squeezed her arm in passing. "Good luck!" she called.

Rice instead of rose leaves! Malmsey, of course. Blast these boys, they did pelt. Ugh! right down my neck. She saw Malmsey, tall and handsome, chalking up some ribaldry on the car. They bungled in, click of gears—they were off—cheers, waves.

"Stop!" Orina banged on the window. "Stop the car, damn you. Stop!"

"What is it?" Stephen said, surprised.

"Stop the car can't you! Stop!"

The driver pulled up at the kerb and Orina flung open the door and jumped out. They had gone a hundred yards from the house and the guests stood curious, still waving limply, while a crowd of sightseers turned on the pavement. Orina

stood calling back, a striking picture in her tight-fitting black dress with the smart black hat and veil and the spray of carnations, blood red to match the blood-red band in her hat and her nails. Stephen, not knowing what to think, looked after her. She ran down the pavement back towards the crowd, still calling. A flashy-looking girl ran to meet her from the throng of onlookers. They met in the clear space between the car and the wondering guests.

"Oh Miss Skipper!" Joyce cried, "you shouldn't have done that."

"Joyce," she shook the girl's hand, "it was sweet of you giving me that present—far too expensive."

"Oh that's all right, Skipper."

"I didn't know where to get hold of you to ask you to the wedding, there wasn't any address. Promise you will come and see me when we get back. You'll find the address, Whyte, in the telephone book."

The girl looked at the radiant bride. "Why did you go away in black, Miss Skipper?"

"It suits me, I thought."

"Don't you——" but she did not finish her remark. "Can I have a carnation to remind me of the old days?"

"Of course." Orina tore one out. "You will come and see me?"

But Joyce didn't answer, she seemed awed by the spectators, but she shouted after Orina, "Good luck!"

Orina's father peered through the doorway. "Forgotten something I suppose. They're off now." He waved his hand at the retreating car. "Did I remember to give her the carnations?" he asked a strange young man.

"No, sir, you have them in your hand. But she had some on, I remember."

"Well, what shall I do with these?" Orina's father asked, plaintively holding the spray in his hand.

The young man looked at the spray of white carnations.

"She had red ones on."

"How like her to do all the wrong things—dressed in black with red carnations. Her mother should tell her."

The young man felt uncomfortable and did not know whether he should answer or not.

"I thought she looked very pretty," he said gently.

"H'm," old Flers mumbled, wandering away with the spray of carnations. "Pretty, that's all they are nowadays, pretty. Little slight things. Pretty! They haven't the guts to be beautiful and womanly."

"You could kiss me," Orina asked Stephen shyly. She was trembling all over as the motor swung along through the streets.

He lifted her veil and kissed her cheek.

"No, no, properly," she uttered, still trembling, looking away from him.

"Thought I might spoil your make-up. Why did you wear black? It makes you so old."

She clasped and unclasped her moist hands, fidgeting with the gloves, her fingers shivering. She looked at the eternity ring on her aspen finger, at the flowers jolting in the vase opposite them. 'The hair growing on his dead face,' Orina thought. She wiped Dennis from her mind. The man that lay below her skin claimed her, filled her with his strange power. All the tears from the years she had loved him burned behind her lids. Was she stepping into evening . . . fading to night?

CYCLE FOUR

THE DEVIL'S SALT-CELLAR

1

THURSDAY, AUGUST 3RD, 1939

"Two more John Collins, Fred."

The steward departed into the sweltering interior of the mahogany-panelled smoke-room.

Dennis lay at ease in the shade of the boat deck. The sun frizzled down from a cloudless sky on the ship which pushed onwards, slitting the flat calm. Coveys of flying fish skimmed away in fright, gliding their hundred yards to splash spent into the boiling water, little silvery specks, as if a giant was playing ducks and drakes with a handful of shillings.

Dennis's companion turned round in his deck chair. The sun didn't seem to have the same power of extracting sweat from his sparse form. His face remained dry and flinty, while Dennis oozed, the moisture running over the scars on to his open-necked shirt.

"It's not a bad place, really, Valupez." The planter spoke lazily, suiting his manner to the morning heat. He scratched one grubby white-ducked leg against the other. "When one gets used to it—and one has to get used to it because once there it's for keeps."

"For keeps?" Dennis asked, rubbing the sweat off his chin with the back of his hand.

"One can never make enough to get out. I've had twenty years of it and I can't do any more than scratch a living. The land's cheap enough, and it will grow anything you shake out of a bag, but what's the use? Something always comes unstuck. It's Mardi Modi all the time."

"What's that, when it's translated?"

"Oh, same thing as 'mañana'. They got their lingo from the Spaniards—or some say the Potru geese—to begin with, or maybe the Wops. However they got it they were

bound to bitch it up—they always bitch everything up *someway*. A language professor came out to study it once, said it was a lost Latin. Tried to get it all card-indexed ou in verbs and nouns with rules—you know how we were taught at school. He was getting on quite well as long as he hung round Tieste, but as soon as he went up-country he found it was hopeless. He went home in despair!" Long John, the planter, scratched his leg again, rumpling up and down his unsuspendered socks. "Take a word like 'Radio' that's the same in all languages, or 'Telephone'. Well, the Vlups call the radio 'El Vocca an Aerie', and the telephone 'El Vocca an Filba'."

"'Filba' meaning a wire?" Dennis queried languidly.

"Wire, string, harness—it does for most things." He laughed. "Accommodating bastards for lingo. If you want to tell a chap to get to hell out of it, you just say 'Veti'; and if you want him to come to you quick you shout 'Veni Vetio'. I tell you it doesn't make sense."

"Thanks, Fred."

Dennis scrawled his name on the chit the smoke-room steward held out to him, and chinked the ice round in the long glass.

The steward smiled at his two best customers.

"You were making a bit of whoopee last night, Mr. Pask?"

"We were getting in training for to-night—the last night."

"Pity the poor sailors on a night like this!" Fred chuckled, and walked back to his simmering smoke-room where two Valupans sat in dark clothes drinking gin fizz, unconcerned by the dancing heat waves.

Long John sucked reflectively.

"I don't believe you're going out to plant at all. Den, why not tell me? I know something about the country—I may be able to help you. People always think the same when they come out here. They're warned before they go, 'Don't tell the natives, they will murder you. Don't tell the whites, they will get it off you.' We're always getting people out with smart ideas—oil, gold, salt, citrus fruits! And they all come out with the same story. 'Oh, no, we're not going to do anything. Oh, no! just for the trip or to

grub bananas.' Nobody's ever coming out to wash for gold or drill for oil. Oh, no!" He sipped his drink and scratched his legs again like a long-feelered insect. "The Yanks," he said reflectively, "are the only people who make anything of the place. They got the whole thing taped from the start. They sent this chap Sturn out and he told the Vlups straight, 'I don't want your gold or your oil or anything which is yours. I am the Sun Ripe Fruit Company and I want to grow bananas.' Well, Del Monte was President at that time——"

Dennis looked up sharply.

"— and of course he didn't believe any such thing, because nobody cares who grows plantains or not. There's plenty of room to grow them if you want to, but they know all foreigners who come out here want minerals or gas. So this American chap, Sturn, asks for a piece of ground, and of course they say very politely they haven't got any, because all the country to the railhead at Palago is divided into estanças and owned by the Vlups and a few oddments like me. But this Sturn tells him 'Keep your bloody estanças. I want to buy ground off you in the Great Plain of Kelbi,' which is beyond the railhead at Palago and no use to anybody—all scrub and mangrove swamp for three hundred miles, till you get to Starinda in the foot-hills of Montabero Rubero, and there's no minerals or oil in this plain, not even salt or borax. So they are very pleased to find a sucker, and they let him buy as much as he wants."

Long John sipped his cold drink as the sea glided past, a great lake of blue with occasional bunches of brown, floating weed.

"Well, what happened? Did they cultivate this place?"

"Did they cultivate it?" The planter laughed. "They got great yellow caterpillar tractors out, the size of houses, and tore up all the mangrove swamps, drained them and brought irrigation down from these Red Mountains to the dry plains, made miles of motor roads, and in no time they had a hell of a fine-show with refrigerator cars to take the stuff to the coast and their own ships calling at regular intervals for the fruit. I tell you, these Yanks can do things.

And what's more, they have something behind them—a Government with punch. As soon as the Vlups saw their flocks and herds multiplying metaphorically they put their heads together, especially Del Monte, the Pres.—he's the chap to put his head round the corner—and they said, 'These Ameranos'—as they call the Yanks—'have made a lovely garden fit for Vlups to dig in. Let's collar it.' So they put a tax on all bananas leaving the country—not per bunch, but per hand. Can you beat it? A knock-out for the Amerano gentlemen. But no, Uncle Sam jumps on their necks and tears them to pieces—at least, threatens to tear them up and means it. The Vlups get the wind vertical, there's a quiet little revolution and President Del Monte finds himself out in the cold, and the Yanks get the right of the road. Can you imagine if it had been British—you or I—what would have happened? Some bloody politician would have got up and said, 'The Valupez Government is quite right. Why should our subjects go out and exploit the uneducated Dago?' and we would be slung out on our ears and told we must not do these things, and we had better come home and raise chickens on food bought at top price from some other Dagoes. I tell you, being British in Valupez is as much good as being an iceman in Hell."

He drained his glass angrily and shouted through the latched open door of the smoke-room, "Shake 'em again, Fred!"

Dennis had been told he must not mention his mission to strangers, but Long had been pally since the trip started, they had changed 'planes, sung songs, confided their grievances together.

'I'll tell him,' Dennis resolved, 'it can't do much harm.' "I have a cousin, Stephen Whyte. Ever heard of him?"

Long John considered. "Stephen Whyte. No, I haven't heard of him."

"Anyway, he's got a lot of money in a company out here—in fact, he's the only shareholder that counts. Wants me to go out and have an unofficial look round—see how things are going."

John hazarded. "Valupez Chemicals?"

"No."

"I believe they're bust. Valupez Government Railway 1932?"

"No."

"Belamina Marble? Red Mountain Mineral Development?"

"Yes. What do you know about it?"

"Oh, quite a bit. I knew all the first gang who came out prospecting. They asked me, as a matter of fact, if I thought there were any minerals in the country." He laughed. "I told them that if they went to these Montabero Rubero they could kick them out with their feet, and if they wanted oil I could show it them welling up in the sand; borax ready to be shovelled, and dry, virgin salt lakes twenty miles across, but if they wanted to know how to get it out of the country they had better ask God—and I doubted if He could tell them.

"Thanks, Fred. Don't forget I'm leaving you the Long millions!"

The planter continued; he didn't get a great deal of conversation and he was letting his tongue have a little exercise on this, the last day of the voyage, before his many weeks of prolonged solitude.

"Well, these chaps—ten of them—went up-country and found all the things I had told them about. More, one chap fell over a gorge, and then there were nine. They got to wondering if there was anything else in the dry salt lakes beside salt, and got wandering about in them in the hot sun, and then there were eight. They didn't take sun-glasses, so one went stone-blind. Only seven came back to our great capital, Tieste de Page, then they did what to them seemed rather a smart thing. They got hold of Del Monte and gave him an interest in their show. Now, Del Monte knows all the ropes, and in no time the Government gave them a great hunk of the richest mining country in the world for a few million pesetas in cash and a good bit more in bribes. Now, as I've been trying to tell you, going into Valupez is the easiest part—anybody can do that. I could get you an oil concession to-morrow, but I couldn't get you a pint out. So as soon as they got their plant hauled up there into those

blasted mountains and had got things kind of going, friend Del Monte shuts the door of the trap—do you get me? Starts taxing the output. Finally he will freeze your cousin out, so he is glad to give them his plant and concessions over as a bad debt, and then Del Monte and his pals will proceed to fight over who has first cut. They will knife each other and have two or three revolutions, and in the end they will get bored. 'Mardi Modi' they will say, but there never will be another day with them; it will just fizzle out like everything else in this bloody country. I tell you, Den, old boy, if these people had gold on their garden paths they would be too lazy to pick it up."

"What about the Americans?" Dennis asked.

"Oh, they're smart that way. They know the Yanks now, after this banana deal, they know if they give Uncle Sam a concession he will be right after it, so they aren't giving any more. But les Englaise—nobody cares a kiss in the dark for us."

Dennis looked along the curve of the deck to the paler blue of the horizon ahead of them where this strange land awaited him, but his thoughts were on those other islands they had visited only a few months before. He tried to see again Orina, but he couldn't call her back—she and Babe remained shadowy, always there at the back of his brain, hazy like the dark smoke which faded away behind the ship.

This John Long was a decent chap, had, too, Dennis guessed, about summed up the position. Long John was really the perfect nickname for this tall, dried-faced planter.

Dennis took an extra pull, the drink was warming in his hands.

"What should I do then?" he asked.

Long laughed. "You tell me first what you are going to do."

"Well, I am to be met by this Del Monte and he is to show me round the town, and then I have letters to the Legation, to the Commercial Secretary, and social introductions to Mr. Curtis Herring, the Minister, and I suppose I will get all their views and—er—see what can be done with the Government."

Long John laughed. "Did you bring your polo kit and your tennis racquet, and a white tuxedo to dance in—stop, till I finish—and a dust-coat when you drive in Curtis Herring's car? Because if you did bring these things I should use them. Get vamped by Del Monte's lovely bitch of a daughter, and stay at the Minister's hot season bungalow in the hills. Do all these things and go home happy after a month well and profitably spent."

"I can't help being green," Dennis said. "Don't rag me. I want to know what I should do, what my best plan is to try and save these mines. You know the country, tell me."

"What's the good. You wouldn't do it. Listen; when you get in with your Del Montes and the big white gentleman at the Legation they will tell you, 'Long! That chap? Oh, he's all right, but you don't want to mix up with people like that. He's only a small planter. Gets drunk in Tieste, consorts with these frightful Americans, a gambler. I don't think I should have much to do with him.' And her nibs will add, 'Mr. Pask, there are only a few British people here, and we naturally try and stick together. But Mr. Long is rather a degraded type—associates with the low class Valupez girls, I believe. I don't think you would care much for him, really."

"I think I understand," Dennis said.

Long John sighed. "I don't blame them. They think because I was once a Public School boy I ought to change every night for dinner and play occasional bridge with the Missionary at Palago. But they haven't been out here twenty years; they haven't been scorched and baked in these bloody plains, and had malaria and gone broke, and know they can never get out, get home for good." He sighed again, and then added vehemently, "And know as I do that I have no home to go to. I didn't realise it till I went back this time. I have no friends in England, I have been away so long I don't understand people at home any more. I don't want to go back again. I'd rather plug on, sweating my guts out here, till the bloody place kills me."

They sat for a considerable time in silence, listening to the muffled thud of the engines and the gentle swish of the

white wake breaking behind the ship. Then Long leant over to Dennis and spoke earnestly.

"My advice to you is to pal up with these Yankee boys, and sell them your concessions. They will give you a hell of a good price. And then run out of it as if the devil himself was after you."

2

FRIDAY, AUGUST 4TH

CAESARE DEL MONTE came aboard and rescued Dennis from a horde of Valupian officials who were questioning the travellers closely in the smoking-room. The variegated voyagers were drawn up in a queue before a table where several uniformed officials examined and re-examined their passports, checked the visas and asked obscure and complicated questions. Long John had told Dennis it would take hours before they could get through, but Caesare Del Monte swept at once forward to where Dennis stood and introduced himself.

"I am Del Monte," he announced theatrically. "You Meester Pask?"

"Yes."

"Welcome then to the land of Valupez, the country of the lovely flowers and divine women——"

"Malaria and lice," Long murmured cynically.

Del Monte looked coldly at John and bowed stiffly.

"Enough," he said tó Dennis. "We go. I have all the arrangements fixed."

He stood back while Dennis bade a brief farewell to the planter. They agreed to meet on Saturday the 16th, when John would make a special visit to the capital to show Dennis—as he put it—how the other half live, and so that Dennis could make the acquaintance of his friends who he described as 'the boys'.

Del Monte shouted a few words at the principal inquisitor sitting behind the pile of passports, and Dennis was swept out on deck and down the gangway.

"I forgot my landing ticket," he murmured weakly in Caesare's ear.

"Not at all necessary," his guide replied. "When you are with me nothing is required. My friends are the friends of Valupez."

They walked ahead in an enforced silence as they were proceeding of necessity in Indian file. Dennis was impressed by the great Del Monte's clothes, he looked as if he was in the stage suit of a juvenile lead playing the provinces in musical comedy—lavender with white pin stripe, vermilion carnation, turned-down trousers hanging low over patent leather shoes, gold-knobbed malacca, orange tie and lavender shirt surmounted by an Eden Homberg—he was good-looking with swarthy dark walnut complexion, greasy crow-coloured hair, and gave forth a strong aroma of over-proof scent.

A dilapidated tin shed filled with boxes and packages leant crookedly on the quay and a gusty wind blew red dust and dead banana leaves about in whirly spirals. Caesare adjusted his step to Dennis's when they were able to walk together again, sticking his chest out and putting his cane under his arm, strutting along like a caricature of a sergeant-major of the old school.

A man in a dusty blue woollen uniform with yellow chevrons on his arm stood at the dock gates, a rifle and fixed bayonet slung on his shoulder by a piece of cord. Dennis couldn't make out whether he was a soldier or a policeman, and his military mind was offended when he noticed that the man was smoking a long black cheroot. Caesare raised his hand in a fascist salute and the bearded sentry responded in the simplest manner by touching his cap.

This slight formality completed they emerged on a dusty street composed of tumbledown white buildings with faded green shuttered windows, hardly any of which seemed to have hinges in working order. They stood in the frying heat of the midday sun while Del Monte shouted at the empty road, "Peatro! Peatro!"

Dennis thought of Orina's cupboard door and that last talk they had.

A cloud of dust approached them and from the interior Dennis heard the screech of brakes, and a large black American-built car drew up on the kerb. The negro driver dexterously

opened the rear door while his master shouted at him what appeared to Dennis to be a continuous storm of abuse.

A strangely exotic girl dressed in primrose yellow was seated in the car. Dennis glimpsed an oval, vivacious face with fine sweeping eyebrows and large, dark, shiny eyes, with heavily made-up eyelashes sticking out in a curved array of spikes.

"My daughter, Annel," Del Monte introduced with a sweep of the ringed hand and a gleam of his white teeth with their prominent gold stoppings.

"How do you do?" Dennis asked, raising his hat politely.

"Enter please," Del Monte requested, and Annel, catching his hand, pulled him forward.

"We have been so excited waiting your coming," she told him animatedly. "It is not often we have the English Cabelers to visit us, only the raff little planter johnnies." She rushed on, "You know Arry Smethe," she continued before Dennis could frame a reply, "you were boat at Zeton, he tells me. Very nice boy."

"Yes," Dennis replied weakly. He felt rather shy before this exotic vision and also a little embarrassed as Caesare had spread himself on the back seat and Dennis found that he was pressed so tightly against Annel that he felt her garter through her thin dress. Looking at the floor he noticed her shapely legs and small feet in the highest of heeled white and brown shoes. "I heard he was out here. He hasn't been in the Diplomatic long."

Annel stared at him with her roguish eyes. "I think him very pretty, yes," and she laughed a low musical laugh, mysterious like the tinkle of water in a cave.

A sensation of suffocation came over Dennis. Annel exuded a strong scent of chypre on one side and her father an even stronger bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley. The windows were shut and the car bumped along the dusty road. Peatro seemed oblivious to any danger at cross-roads. Perhaps the traffic was negligible. But it seemed to Dennis, a-tingle with nerves since his own smash, dangerous to drive full out across blind crossings merely sounding a fanfare on the three-noted horn.

Caesare leant across him and pointed at a comparatively modern building with a green tiled roof and dusty palms in tubs in front of it.

"Hotel de Ville, what you call," he informed, rolling a cigar over in his mouth. He jerked his thumb in Annel's direction. "She made the opening—cut the tape, what you say. Nineteen hundred and thirty sefen." He held his hand horizontally a few feet off the swaying car floor. "Just a leetle kid," he laughed pleasantly, and nudging Dennis pointed through the other window. "Maison de postalia—very up to date." He laughed. Dennis found out that Caesare often laughed before and after making a joke. "Free ink for Aberdeen's automatic pens." He laughed again at the age-old pleasantry and Dennis laughed, too, but not at the joke itself, but that such an obscure joke on racial psychology should have penetrated and be appreciated in Valupez.

"Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks very much."

Caesare handed Dennis a cigar. "Smoke later," he instructed him.

Annel looked at Dennis curiously and he returned the gaze. She had a large, luscious mouth, and it parted now in a smile to show an even row of white, strong teeth. There was something vicious about the teeth; cruel, sensuous, they looked ready to bite one.

"How you scratch your face? Shaving les barbes?"

"No, motor smash," Dennis supplied shortly.

"They are pretty," she said, "like duel scars. Most Angles are so baby face."

"Opera House?" Dennis enquired of a big building that came flashing past. He didn't care what it was, but wished to change the conversation.

"No, no," Annel gurgled. "Haf you seen the Amerano film *All Down the Street?*"

"Yes, it's good, isn't it?"

"I have already been four times, and I go again," she told him gaily.

This girl seemed a film fan of the first magnitude, but

Caesare told him it had been running a month. "We don't like quick change."

Annel sang in a rich, exciting voice with strange trills and snapping of red-nailed fingers, "Tirano sura sombrero, Tirano sura filbrano, Vieneta borchans doserano, Marchina omnaiva avena les downandout, Tidle oi, Tidle oi."

Dennis joined in, he had got the idea. He slapped his knees in the 'tiddly om pom poms' and Annel immediately became enchanted. He had never seen a girl fire up into excitement so quickly. They repeated the chorus, Dennis endeavouring to follow the Valupian words. Caesare did not think it a bit odd or unbefitting to shout songs in the local Piccadilly at the lunch rush hour and joined in, encouraging the duettists, waving his hands in time, but in the middle of the third chorus he returned to his rôle of guide, and digging Dennis suddenly with his elbow pointed to a large, imposing building in the process of construction.

"Our office," he declared proudly, "the newest style of all. Six whole straitas, with two"—he held up two fingers—"elevators, express and ordinary, lavatories and baths on every straitas and a garden of flowers on the roof, the company name to be written in gold Valupez dollars on the floor of the foyer, all the furniture of Valupez mahogany, and the directors' apartments encased in Belamina marble." He nudged Dennis and winked, and putting his hand to his mouth, a gesture indicating that his daughter was too young to know these things, whispered deafeningly in Dennis's ear, "We will play some larks there."

Dennis smiled uncomfortably.

The car had drawn up at an imposing hotel. A flashily uniformed porter swung open the door. Dennis suddenly remembered that he had done nothing about his luggage.

He turned to Caesare. "I say," he asked anxiously, "I forgot about my things."

"Your things?" Del Monte flashed, puzzled. "Ah, you mean the baggage. I ordered express men to have it conveyed. Enter."

Dennis and Annel were ushered through the marble pillared doorway to a cool green rush mat carpeted entrance hall where a morning-coated manager bowed gravely.

"Welcome to Valupez. We wish to make your stay here a memorable occasion of comfort and interest."

Dennis shook hands and answered awkwardly, "Thanks very much."

The manager led the trio up a broad flight of stairs to the first floor where they entered a suite of rooms. Annel caught Dennis's arm and led him to the principal table of the living-room where a bowl stood filled with the loveliest orchids Dennis had ever seen.

"Like them?"

"Oh," Dennis said, "they're wonderful."

"I arranged for them," she smiled.

Her father was walking round with the manager, throwing open cupboard doors as if to satisfy himself that everything was in order.

The party marched into the bedroom and Caesare flung open the elaborately decorated wardrobe with patent switches so, he explained, they light up when the door is opened. But it happened to be an off-day for the electric supply company. He even flung open the small door of an elaborate Louis Seize cupboard by the bedside, displaying a porcelain, blue and gold decorated utensil. "Everything you see," he said proudly, "the best."

Annel had rushed into the pale blue-tiled bathroom, a mechanical maze of chromium fittings, showers and sprays. "Ou la! look, Niagara!" she laughed, pulling a chromium chain, but nothing happened. It was an off-day for the waterworks also, it seemed.

They returned to the living-room. A waiter had put the flaming exotic orchids to one side and placed a tray of champagne on the table.

"I give you a toast," Del Monte cried, raising his glass on high. "To our Red Mountains and the English."

Dennis started to drink the toast, then stopped. "But," he said, "I thought they were going bust."

"Nonsense," Del Monte declared. "With you, and me, and Mister Whyte behind us, nothing will stop them."

Dennis took his glass and with an unwonted firmness declared, "All the same, I think I'll drink to your country and your beautiful daughter."

"Bravo!" Annel cried. "The first Englishman I have met who could make a pretty speech." She touched her glass against his in a caressing movement, and looking with those animated eyes at him, declared, "I drink to you, and to you only."

Dennis raised his glass again, but felt a sudden coldness—those eyes, that laughing face. 'I've been made a fool of too often,' he thought. 'It's all part of their game.'

The orchids caught his eye, glaring out in the dull room. Flowers of strange beauty, like this girl, perhaps, gaining their sweetness from the life-blood of trees. Parasites—symbolic of passion—infinitely selfish, fantastic shapes of alluring vital colour that hung on to life although separated from their coiling, writhing stems; tenacious, unwilling to die, to fade, because perhaps they knew that, like sexual love, the slightest drooping would cause their capricious owners to throw them in the dust-bin, little brown withered things, hideous in death, giving off the dank odour of decay.

His face hardened as he looked at Annel. He spoke harshly. "Straight down the hatch, old girl."

3

SATURDAY, AUGUST 5TH

MR. CURTIS HERRING was a correct man; correct in all those fine niceties that the English gentleman holds sacred. You would never catch Mr. Herring wearing the wrong shade of carnation. If you glanced at his buttonhole you knew at once that it was the correct red, the red that didn't shout flame or blush pink; you would not be embarrassed by an additional spray of asparagus fern or a tinfoil-wrapped stalk. Mr. Herring knew how easy it was for a man to become enraptured with the idea of wearing a white carnation at night. In his distinguished career as a diplomat he knew how important it was to resist temptations of this nature.

Variations of braid on evening trousers or bone buttons—Herring knew he couldn't do things like that. Yes, you could trust Herring to have the right red carnation, except, of course, at Goodwood when he would have the exact shade of yellow.

Some of his friends criticised, strictly in private, his brown leather shoes with a grey flannel suit. But Curtis held strongly —and I do not think unreasonably or without precedence— that suede is out of character with a double breasted pin stripe. 'Co-respondents' he only allowed with a tussore washable suit, which to his annoyance tailors would refer to as Tropical or Miami. Black 'co-respondents' he did not allow at all. The sudden sweeping away of the hard shirt with the dinner jacket had worried him to distraction, but he had, with diplomatic foresight and perfect taste, discarded the dinner jacket altogether and adopted the velvet smoking in shades of dark blue and wine.

When Dennis strolled into the Legation drawing-room, dressed in a tussore washing, black 'co-respondents' with strap fastenings and an old Etonian tie, Mr. Herring nearly fainted. Dennis wandered sheepishly round the room. Green Venetian slat blinds projected the arc whiteness of the sun in narrow bands. Unaccustomed to the glaring beams he could not at first distinguish his host or family.

"Er—Pask, have you met my wife?"

"No, sir. How do you do?"

Mrs. Curtis Herring was tall and stately in flowered georgette with Dulish pearls draped in ridge and furrow over her scraggy neck bones. Her hair surprised Dennis. Expecting elaborate 'perms' to match the pearls and smart frock, he found a parted and roped coiffure which seemed strangely incongruous.

"And my daughter," the diplomat indicated, but the daughter was zebra-ed by the horizontal beams and he could not make her out.

"An apéritif?"

"Oh, thanks awfully," Dennis murmured shyly, expecting sherry. But the apéritif turned out to be Dubonnet Frap in iced glasses dipped in sugar, accompanied by feathery russet wafers of unusual design.

"Did you have a pleasant crossing?"

"Oh yes, rather, Mrs. Herring."

"Nice passengers?" This from the horizontally lighted daughter.

"Yes, rather. I palled up with a very decent chap—plants out here."

"Brander?" Herring asked hopefully.

"No, Long," Dennis answered, wiping some of the sugar off his chin.

"Oh yes," Curtis silked non-committingly. "Will you have another? No? Well, in that case, dear——" He did not finish sentences, but he conveyed that they were to go in to lunch.

Dennis inadvertently spilt some of the langouste mayonnaise over the footman's cotton gloved hand, and trying to fork a piece of cucumber off a slithery block of ice in a small silver bowl, upset the sauce boat with his elbow.

"Oh, I am frightfully sorry."

Mrs. Herring smiled as if it was quite an ordinary event and enquired, "I do hope it hasn't stained your nice clean suit?"

"Were you at school with our new secretary?" Mr. Herring asked hastily. He seemed oblivious to Dennis trying to spoon up the red sauce, or to the kneeling butler swabbing with a napkin.

"Yes, rather, a great friend. Pity he's on leave." Dennis took his cue, the sauce incident was closed. "We were in the same div."

"I am afraid you will find it frightful here," Miss Curtis Herring volunteered in her turn, trying to gloss the sauce wreck.

Dennis glanced in her direction and noticed a wide shouldered, bull-headed creature with a pug expression.

"Of course I shall be . . ." he paused, it did not seem fitting to discuss anything so worldly as business in this palace of tact. "I shall be very interested in the country."

"What do you think of the beautiful Annel?" she enquired.

For no reason in the world Dennis felt he was going to blush, a thing he had not done since childhood.

Mr. Herring must, with his sleepy eyes that saw everything, have noticed the colour mounting in Dennis's tanned face, for he switched the conversation off Annel, led it away from the scorching red dust clouds of Valupez to cool English fields, where men were peacefully cutting the chrome corn—

binders chucking out the thistly bunches while shouting youths beat rabbits to death with sticks.

He tossed the conversation over to his wife.

"Mary Flers is my sister, you know."

Dennis supposed he ought to have known, but Orina knew little of her mother's people, seldom mentioning them. "Father," she had told him, "says Mum was a rose in a nettle bed."

"Mary is my eldest sister. I wish we could have gone to Orina's wedding. It was sudden, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it was," Dennis answered. He wondered if they knew the part he had played—their engagement had never reached hatches, catches and despatches; they probably hadn't.

"Were you a dry bob?" Miss Herring shot at him, and without waiting for the answer, stated, "Malmsey was terribly good at cricket, wasn't he?"

"I had my 'twenty-two'," Dennis replied, defending himself.

Mr. Herring looked at Dennis wonderingly. This distinction in school cricket would entitle him to wear an 'Eton Rambler' tie, a suitable accompaniment for a tussore washing. Mr. Herring decided to mention it at a later date when their acquaintanceship had reached the stage that he could criticise Dennis's lack of proper dress sense.

"What sort of man is Stephen Whyte?" Miss Herring enquired. "He looks rather good looking in the pictures we have."

After the ladies had left, Dennis tried to broach the subject of the Red Mountain Mineral Development Company.

Mr. Herring was really annoyed. This boy, a stranger from afar, whom he had Dubonned, Langousted, Liebfraumilched and now, at this moment, was porting: this boy, garishly attired in a garment he had referred to openly as a Palm Beach suit and shod in black and white shoes with straps—incredible, but true, with straps: this boy was asking the British Minister extraordinary and plenipotentiary questions about a speculative mine.

Mr. Curtis Herring looked at Dennis with just the right mixture of polite attention and surprise, the 'I am a stranger here, myself' gaze familiar to all motorists.

"The Commercial Secretary, Mr. Cog, deals with questions of this nature." He paused, then lest his answer might seem too crushing, he added, "Monsieur Del Monte, the late president, is endeavouring to help these sort of companies as much as possible. A very capable man, a first-class organiser, very able." He gazed thoughtfully at his glass of wine.

"This fellow Long you met coming over—not a very . . . I don't think I should get too involved in friendships with these sort of people. Their position here is rather a delicate one. The Valupians resent foreigners exploiting their resources, they are a proud and independent race, with a beautiful language and laudable national pride. My duties in cementing Anglo-Valupian friendships are constantly hindered by men like Long, who consider that His Majesty's Government——"

Dennis's weak mind wandered off; he heard Mr. Herring murmuring away, using phrases about *laisser faire, ad hoc* discussions, and M.F.A., which meant nothing to him, but from the pieces he could understand he formed the opinion that he need not expect a great deal from the Legation.

Mr. Cog, whom he met in the afternoon, was not at all helpful. It transpired that the formation of the company had been carried out without consulting him in the first instance. No one in the position of highly paid expert adviser likes to be entirely passed over, and Mr. Cog felt that his corns had been trodden on. He now took the attitude, "When they're all broke they will be sorry they did not ask me."

After tea Dennis and Kitty Herring played tennis on a hard, rolled, mud court. Kitty had a great deal of style. When she served she pointed her toe, taking great pains to eliminate the chance of serving a foot fault. Then she threw the ball high in the air and, with a flourish of her racquet, patted it gently into the net. Although this fate overtook

all her first services, she seemed perennially surprised. Her second serve was a repetition of the first, but softer and higher, and it usually got near enough the dirty white lines for Dennis to pretend that it was not a fault. The surround nets had recently been eaten by a local rodent, a ratty-ferrety creature with nocturnal habits and apparently a passion for tarred string. The ravages of the 'Kinkio' necessitated the calling up of an army of small black boys with tight black curls and broad grins of white marble teeth, who dived amongst the hibiscus hedge and crashed gaily through beds of scarlet canna to retrieve red dusty balls.

At length they retired to the long cool verandah, where an inviting tray of iced drinks stood on a green basketwork table of native design. They sipped in silence, swinging backwards and forwards in rocking chairs.

"What's that blue stuff?" Dennis asked at length, jerking his cigarette in the direction of a great mass of mauve bougainvillaea that cascaded over the whitewashed garden wall.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" Kitty answered. "I am no good at gardening, but I think it's called 'Thumbergia'. You see those things growing in the blue-tiled coping of the wall? They are Snapdragons. Funny, isn't it? Ordinary English Snapdragons."

"What sort of birds do you have here?"

Kitty considered for some time. "It's funny, but one hardly ever sees any birds here at all. I don't think there can be any. They probably eat them. Of course, there's hundreds of seagulls down at the shore, and vultures. They're so tame they walk about in the streets. Oh, of course, I had forgotten the most marvellous humming birds—weeny teeny things, bright like butterflies; and there're masses of moths and butterflies, the big blue things fly too high to see. Oh, and fireflies—they're wonderful, too. It's rather cruel, they put them in their hair, the girls do, quite sort of decent girls like Annel.

"I was at school with Orina. She's awfully pretty, isn't she? Mummie doesn't like Mr. Long because he came to a party here once—you know, a sort of garden thing—and got frightfully tight. I thought it was rather funny, but

Mummie was furious. Actually it was rather a rotten thing to do, wasn't it? I say, you are good at tennis. Do you play polo, too? They have such a job to get up a team. Actually it's frightfully funny. Orina wrote and told us you were coming, she said you were awfully nice. Did you know Betty Trent? She was at school with us. Well, of course, you would. Actually it's frightfully funny. Orina says Betty is married, and she says he's frightfully nice. Actually you know, Orina terrifies me. I suppose Stephen's frightfully rich?"

Kitty paused to sip her iced lemon. Dennis looked at her, amazed by such a flow of conversation.

"Yes," he said as a sort of general reply to all the mass of questions.

A humming bird flashed across an arc of metallised green and started to hover, sucking the flowers on the creeper near them, then it flashed away.

"Wasn't that lovely?" Dennis cried, excited.

"Heaven," Kitty answered unmoved. "Do you know, actually this girl Annel is rather a friend of mine. You know, there was a frightful row—perhaps I shouldn't tell you, but they call her the 'Kinkio' because she comes and steals all the young men's hearts. Do you know, they fight duels over her, and one man was killed. Actually, you know. we had an honorary attaché here and he got frightfully keen on her, and he spent all his money giving her expensive presents, and do you know she was beastly to him, and Daddy had him sent home and—actually this is terrible and I shouldn't tell you, but he jumped overboard on the way back—at least they think he must, he——" Kitty stopped suddenly, she saw her mother approaching.

A slight but perceptible change came over her; she uncrossed her legs, pulled her skirt straight, squared her shoulders and straightened up in the chair, stopped rocking. Even her voice changed, it became lower and more suave. "It's really too hot here in the summer, we go up to the mountains."

"The Red Mountains?" Dennis queried.

"Yes, they're lovely, the trees are all covered with exquisite orchids."

"Why do they call them the Red Mountains?" he asked.

"That's funny, I never thought of it. I don't know why. They aren't red, anyway."

4

MONDAY, AUGUST 7TH

DEL MONTE's villa was situated, like the Legation, in the suburb of Tasco. A green-tiled roofed rambling erection with a Victorian interior of plush and peeling gilt.

Del Monte beamed at Dennis with his array of gold-stopped teeth. "It is unfortunate that the Government here makes these taxes, very unfortunate." He slapped his knee. "But all is not lost, no. You must tell your friend, this Mister Whyte, that he must get us more money. See, money speaks. I know, I was President myself. Everything can be done with money. I will see the President, make those little affairs that are necessary, and the taxes will come off and we all make a lot of money."

"But," Dennis hazarded, "if we do put more money in, what guarantee will we have that they will remove these taxes?"

Mr. Del Monte smiled a fleet flash of gold. "I will have witnesses listening when I give our little presents, then if they double-cross we will expose them and they will be thrown out and I will become President again, and I will take away all the taxes at once."

"But," Dennis queried anxiously, "what guarantee will we have? I mean, how do we know you will be able to do this thing? There are surely other members of Parliament—they may oppose you."

"Oppose me? Del Monte? My friend, you do not know me. I cannot fail, do you hear? I cannot fail. Now we are fixed we will need a hundred thusa livres English—English pounds."

Dennis shook his head. "It's a lot of money."

Caesare leant forward, slapping his pudgy knee.

"Señor Dennis, in our concessions there are millions and millions of English one pound's worth of minerals. It is the

richest mine in the world. What is a few miserable pounds more or more if we are to capture this prize without-price?"

"I suppose so," Dennis answered doubtfully, "but it seems rather a bad show to have to bribe these people."

"Yes, yes, you are quite right, it is disgusting. Bah! bribes! But what have you? There is no other way. It will take a leetle money, but once done we are safe because they will not make brave enough to give us the double-cross. If they dared, we expose them—tell the voters how they bribe. They will be thrown out and I will go back as President. Then we can get concessions for oil, as well form a little concern for oil and then chemicals—tang oil. There is no limit . . ."

"I thought there was a chemical company here already?"

Caesare waved his hand. "Nothing. A few taxes and they are finished. Then there is Guano Islands. Listen. No one has taken anything out of this country. I know what it has got. I have travelled with the technicians from Europe. They know, they tell me it is a bag of gold and nobody has put their hands in it. A little diplomacy and it is O.K. We fix it all." He laughed in his childish excitement.

"But you, yourself——" Dennis started, but stopped. He felt it would be rude to suggest that Del Monte might give them the same medicine he advocated for his compatriots.

"See this, Monsieur," Caesare shouted, "do I build the biggest offices in Valupez? Do I have them fabricated in concrete reinforcements? Do I have them paved with Belamina marble and gold pieces sewn in the floor? Do I do this and then desert the company? No! Why should I?" He spread his hands. "I know which side to bread my butter. If I leave your company how can I produce money to fabricate such a concern? Where in Valupez will I find enough? How can I make emoluments for myself out of nothing? Listen, I am right deep in this company—hook, flaba an' zinker." He laughed. "I have already a method so we may circumvent the Government and make a leetle money for ourselves, you see. Listen. We bribe? Yes. And they withdraw the taxes. Then we say we expose them unless they give us the money back. So what have they to do? Give it back, and we get

everything fixed for nothing, and they cannot alter afterwards and tax again, or we still expose."

"We couldn't do that," Dennis said firmly, "it would not be straight."

"Straight?" Caesare questioned, puzzled.

"Dishonest," Dennis qualified.

"It is they who are dishonest because they accept bribes, not we. We are O.K."

"Well, I know Stephen Whyte would never consent to that."

Caesare smiled. "Ah, so then it is all the better for us, because we can keep the money ourselves when they pay it back, and the company will not mind for they will have the taxes removed."

"As a matter of fact," Dennis said, "I am sure Stephen will not agree to bribing these politicians in the first place."

Caesare searched Dennis with his eyes. "But you agree—see it is necessary?"

"Yes, I think it is the only thing to do. The mine can't work if the Government are going to tax the minerals to extinction, and unless something is done the whole lot is lost. What I can't understand is how this chap Stephen sent out before to look into things could have thought everything lovely in the garden."

Del Monte laughed. "I warned him, but oh no! he would not listen to me. Oh no! As soon as he came I told him we must have more money for presents to the Government. I explained my little plan to him, same way as I do now to you—but you are sensible, a man of business, clever, you see at once, clevare boy. He was silly. He go off to the Government. Oh yes, they say, all O.K. See, they know there is no money out here at that time, they want to get the mouse in the trap, see? So he wire off to Mister Whyte O.K. He tell me before he go they are nice—the Government nice! Listen, I say, you see who nice—you wait. And now they see who is nice, they see."

"I don't quite follow why you wanted to bribe them at that time before they had done anything—they might have kept their word and not put on the taxes."

"I knew, silly boy, I knew what they were going to do.

Annel received the most largest diamonds. She asked me 'ow much money the company had out here. See I was silly; I told her the money is not here yet. She had been given these presents to find out." He spread his hands wide. "So she told them no money here, and they knew zis mouse was not yet in the trap, see."

"What a rotten trick."

Caesare laughed. "No. No, she is a nice girl—you cannot blame her. A few diamonds for nothing. I laughed when I thought it over."

"Didn't you tell her off?"

"Tell her off?"

"Yes. Get angry."

"No, no. Zee, if I tell her I give the show up, see, because when I see these diamonds I know she is after something, and when she ask me ever so simply, Haf they much money here? I say, No, nothing. It has not arrived yet." Caesare laughed. "So she says, I thought there was lots, and I say, No, no by my mother's heart, no by all the saints, no, there is no money out here; and she is sure there is none here and tells the Government so." Caesare leant forward and poked Dennis in the ribs. He winked. "I am smart for the money is here all the time."

Dennis was amazed at a country where fathers and daughters would cheat each other.

"I am sure it's no good asking Stephen, he would never dream of giving money for bribes."

Caesare shrugged. "Too bad, but no mater—we will say it is for some other purpose, yes?"

"No, I couldn't say that. I wouldn't lie to him."

Caesare shrugged again. "If he sent money out for the company, that would be O.K. Then I could borrow it out for the bribes and after the taxes are removed I will threaten and get the bribes back, pay it to the company so nobody is hurt, yes?"

"Well, I don't think he is very keen to go on with the thing, anyway. He's lost enough."

"But," shouted Caesare, "he need not lose any more—he can make. Señor Dennis, you are out here to make everything

right. How can you if you don't do the right thing?" He spread his hands and added, "This is the only way I know, the only possible plan that will work."

"I'll think it over," Dennis answered.

"Yes, quite right, think it over. Shall we go to Annel, yes?"

A pergola covered by a thick creeper with waxy bell-shaped flowers made a refreshing coolness from the red dancing glare. Annel lay in a hammock, her dark face glowed in an impish smile. Caesare waved at them and departed.

"Ullow."

Dennis sat down beside the hammock on a green wicker-work chair. "Hullo," he answered, looking at her wonderingly. Long had described her as a bitch and from what he had heard she deserved the title. He made up his mind that, whatever happened, she wasn't going to ensnare him. 'Little beast,' he thought, angrily, he hated cheating, 'I'll teach her. I'll show her there is one man whom she has no power over.'

Orina hadn't loved him, and he had wasted all the best in him on her—given her his idealism that a man can only give once to a woman. Babe, poor little Babe, he had given there more than he had got. 'I've been hunted by girls—even this Kitty Herring is on the war-path. Not one of them has ever given me anything that hurt, mattered an acrobat's fall to them, and now I've met the high priestess of sorcery, the arch diamond-miner of the lot. Well, let her turn on the sweet tap—she won't get any change out of me.'

He looked at her. She was watching him intently.

"A penny for those thoughts," she offered.

Dennis smiled and lied, "I was wondering how you could bear to look at me with my face all cut to ribands—it's not a nice sight."

"I like it. I like a man to have done something. No English here ever does anything."

"What about Long and the other British planters? They do something."

"Mister Long is very nice." She considered and then flashed a smile at Dennis. "But he hates me. He calls me a bitch."

"Well, aren't you?" Dennis answered quietly.

Annel laughed, her eyes under the spiky lashes dancing with fun and mischief. "If my boy-friends hear you call me names they will kill you—so!" She snapped her delicate coffee fingers.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She smiled with a strange movement of the corners of her mouth, and then became serious.

"They are such fools, these men. I am not making any mistake with them. This English one, I tell him not to be silly."

"Was that the chap who jumped overboard?"

She nodded.

"Of course you are sure he did it because of you?"

She nodded again.

"Probably he got tight and slipped over."

She shook her head. "No, he writes me he is doing it." She held her hand out to Dennis. "He gave me this ring. Pretty, isn't it?"

"How you have the nerve to wear the thing beats me."

Annel laughed. She pursed her alluring mouth and looked at Dennis with a come-and-hug-me expression. Dennis lit a cigarette without offering her one. He blew out the match and threw it carelessly into the hammock. Annel's face changed, she sat up quickly.

"You would be better to be my friend."

"I don't know. If we're friends you will double-cross me some way, and if we're enemies you will do the same, so it doesn't matter much really, and on the whole I should prefer to start the way we're going to finish."

She sank back again and he could not see her face, but her voice came to him from the cushions, a pleading, wistful voice.

"Even though you don't like me it would be civil to offer a cigarette."

Dennis placed one in the hand dangling over the edge of the hammock. She peered back at him over the side, "Gratsiora," then dug her long nails into the paper and tore the tobacco out, rolled it into a ball and threw it away.

"What the hell's the use of giving you gaspers when you just tear them up. It's like feeding nuts to monkeys on Bank Holiday."

She looked at him, smiling again. "Now, Dennis, don't get cross. I didn't want it. I don't smoke."

"Well, why ask for it?"

"Just a leetle lesson in manners." Annel laughed again.

"Well, if you want me to like you——"

She stopped him with a gesture. "Don't you like girls, Dennis? Pretty girls? They're fun, aren't they?"

"Of course. Who doesn't like pretty girls?"

"Then like me. I'm pretty."

"Are you?" Dennis smiled. "You should have been in the advertising business."

"You English, you're so cold, you only like leetle pinkie blonde girls—things like Kitty 'Erring."

"I thought you were supposed to be friends?"

"No, no," Annel cried vehemently. "Friends with this English Miss! Listen. She is in love with Le Tora, the bull-fighter." She laughed savagely. "I would not speak to him. He 'as sent me presents 'undreds of times, and I will not talk a word to him. And now Miss Legation she loves him. Ha, he is nothing, a no good. She has only spoken a few words to him but keeps his photo portrait and looks at it every night before she goes to sleep. It is true. She tells me as a secret."

Dennis looked coldly at Annel. "So you have to tell me. You're a nice one to confide in!"

She laughed. "Give me another cigarette."

"What's the good? you don't smoke."

"I do really, I was only joking."

Dennis handed her a cigarette and she dug her nails into it and tore it up, rolling it into a ball and dropping it languidly on the ground.

"You see, I am a liar, and a monkey. I don't want your nuts."

"I am glad we have decided to be enemies."

"You do like me, really?"

"No, I am damned if I do. If it's true all these people here fall for you, the competition must be dreadful, the class is bad—Brandon Park sellers."

"What you say?"

"Oh, you wouldn't understand."

"Sellers? What's they?"

"Oh, it's too hot to explain."

She looked at Dennis angrily. "It is something like bitch."

"All right, it's something like bitch. I must go."

As he rose she caught his hand. "Dennis, wait. You are right. I am what you say a seller—bitch, but it is not my——my—I don't know the word—like tennis."

"Your fault?" He held her hand. Perhaps she wasn't really so bad.

"Not my fault. The men make sillies over me, and here, in this country, you have to be not slow like English—sharp—otherwise everyone makes a fool of you." She drew him down so her lips were near his ear. "Be friends with me. I will help you."

He looked at her mouth inviting a kiss; he felt her other hand stroking the scars on his face.

"Be friends, I like you."

"All right, old girl, I'll be friends." He bent over and kissed the passionate lips. "But don't you try and put anything over on me or I'll break your neck." He put his hands on the soft column of her neck and squeezed it gently.

Life is strange. Dennis, the meek, the idealistic with women, should suddenly play caveman with the most dangerous woman in Valupez, where women were more dangerous than snakes. But the strangest thing about it was Annel herself. She had played for position, drawn Dennis's face down close to her so that she could dig her nails into those scars and tear the flesh, make him pay for the insults he had given her, but something came over her and instead she kissed him back, passionately, and whispered in his ear, "Look out for my father—he is no good."

5

TUESDAY, AUGUST 15TH

THE Legation gardens glowed with multi-coloured paper lanterns, the stars in the black velvet sky twinkled silverly, the negro band beat out the swingy music with a wild savagery that made Dennis's whole being throb. They had the power of transforming the worn dance tunes into wild sacrificial anthems of the jungle. In the hush of the tropical night they recaptured the fevered passion of the melody which civilised Europe had discreetly covered with a hypocritical blanket of propriety. The fireflies glowed like floating pocket torch bulbs, and in the sketchy grass of the lawns the worms made little patches of phosphorescent light. The Valupian day was red dazzling dust, which lay in a coating over everything, dusty scentless flowers, dusty grapefruit on dirty trees, wind-torn palms, garbage and paper everywhere; but at night everything became beautiful—the flowers and trees gave forth exotic perfumes, the dust and the tangled barbed wire fences, the crooked electric standards—all the ugliness disappeared to give place to the hushed sweetness of the throbbing night.

Dennis took Kitty Herring's arm and shepherded her to the buffet, but he looked distastefully at the iced coffee and claret cup.

Mr. Herring smiled at him. "If you go along to my room you will find whisky and things."

"Oh, thanks awfully."

"Kitty will show you the way," he added, and Dennis heard the old familiar note in his voice of the male hunting for his young, but he didn't care, the night had got him, the wine at dinner, the rhythm of the band, the sudden beautifying of the garden. Kitty Herring also was excited, and as soon as she left the eagle eyes of her parents, broke into her inane babble of talk.

"Shall I say when?"

Dennis hated having somebody else pour out drinks for him, but this night nothing mattered.

"When's out to-night," he laughed. "Throw your luck over your shoulder!"

She handed him a silver goblet half-filled with whisky. He splashed the soda and she dropped in a few pieces of ice. He raised the chalice high.

"To hell with everything!"

Kitty raised her iced coffee and repeated shyly, "To hell with everything.

"Aren't they frightful—the Valupians? When Daddy gives a party I think he should lock up all the spoons."

"They look all right to me," Dennis answered, thinking of Annel with the full crimson dress and the scarlet flower in her hair. He had glimpsed her several times, but she was always surrounded with soliciting partners.

"Of course you don't live here. Actually, of course, we don't either. But they are definitely frightful."

"All of them?" Dennis enquired. He had grown to dislike the English habit of calling every other nation frightful.

"Oh yes, I mean the sort of decent people are impossible."

"And the others are much worse?" Dennis laughed. Kitty had unconsciously amused him, but she annoyed him too. "Even bull-fighters?" he asked.

Kitty blushed, a strawberry wave over the creamy face. Her hand shook as she gulped her iced coffee but she didn't reply to his question.

"Look, there's one of those frightful moths or bats—look out! it may be poisonous."

Dennis chased the moth round the room till it lit on the net window curtains.

"Oh, it's lovely, it's a moon moth—I brought some out from chrysalises at school."

Kitty came over and stood beside him in the shadow of the curtains, looking at the large soft creature, its antennae trembling feverishly as if it was in tune with the madness of the night.

"Yes, it is lovely. They must be rare—I have never seen one before."

Dennis smiled down at her. 'Idiot,' he thought, 'there are probably thousands about but you're far too keen making day-dreams round bull-fighters to notice.'

She looked rather sweet in the violet shadow of the curtains, a puppyish, rather undeveloped creature with a smart white dress, and round her neck, of all things, a locket hung by a thin gold chain. He put his arm round her and drew her to him. She pressed nearer, unresisting. He felt the elastic of her brassiere against his hand and a schoolboy desire came over him to pull it out and let it catapult back against the pudginess of her back. He resisted the temptation and bent forward to kiss her, but she lowered her head and instead he kissed her hair. He thought suddenly of the laundry at Stephen's country house where he played as a boy—he supposed it was something to do with hot irons. He made up his mind to release her, say "Sorry, I have been beastly," but she turned her face up to him and squeezed his back gently.

"I didn't know you cared," she whispered pathetically.

"Of course I do," Dennis answered, he didn't know why, and bending forward, kissed her cheek. She had turned her face away.

"I thought you were frightfully nice, you remember, the first day we played tennis."

"Yes, I remember."

Dennis had been trying to fix in his mind who this girl was like, and now he remembered. Betty Trent, as a deb. He realised that being out here had acted as a preservative, keeping her in the same state that she had left school, with all the 'actuallys' and 'frightfully funnys' of those bygone days. She hadn't realised that in the few years her school-friends had altered, changed imperceptibly as the world changed. He had acted caddishly when he kissed her. She thought now he meant more than he did. He saw her face raised, looking into his. He bent forward and kissed the shy, upturned mouth and felt a faint sexual response like the tick of a watch under a ton of cotton-wool.

She stood there in his arms, waiting for him to speak. Dennis was rather drunk, he couldn't remember what it was he was supposed to say. He pulled the thin chain of the locket and raised it from the valley between the white pudgy mounds, the crescents of which rose from the white lace top

of her dress. There was a lock of pale hair set in the back and initials on the gold front. He looked at her enquiringly.

"My brother," she answered. There was a wistful sadness in her voice as she added, "He died when we were in China."

Maybe it was the drink, or the night, or because Dennis under his spoilt exterior had a tender streak. However it was, he held her tightly and spoke earnestly.

"You're all right now, I'll look after you. We'll get married or something."

"Oh, Dennis," Kitty murmured.

"That's all right," Dennis remarked, unconsciously conceited. "We'll have some fun. I rather like abroad," he added with complete geographical vagueness. "We might live there." He kissed her again and to his surprise noticed her eyes were moist with tears. "Cheer up, old girl! We'll have another drink," he said, affectionately slapping her soft, yielding behind.

They walked arm in arm to the table where the overhead lamp made a circle of light on the silver tray of decanters and goblets.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Dennis said affably, but no one will ever know what Dennis intended to do, for Mr. Cog, the Commercial Secretary, interrupted their tête-à-tête with a message for Kitty. Her mother wanted her to come at once and talk with the American Minister's wife.

The Commercial Secretary smiled at Dennis. "Mr. Del Monte came to see me yesterday. He explained that you have given him authority to act as head of the Red Mountain Corporation in this country."

"Have I?" Dennis murmured, swishing down his second flagon.

"He explained that as it is a British company he wanted to consult me first and get my opinion of the best manner to proceed with the working of the concern."

"Oh yes," Dennis answered. This man was a bore. He didn't want to listen to him—get back to the dance, have some fun.

"He is a very sensible man, Mr. Del Monte, with sound views."

"I'll say so," Dennis grinned, pouring himself out another drink.

"He didn't wish the original company to do anything in the first place without consulting me."

"Didn't he?"

"The present suggestion is that all the British interests here should be pooled into one parent company, which would form a definite basis of negotiation with the Government. To do this will necessitate the issue of a nominal share capital to float the administrative company, and I have suggested your cousin, Mr. Whyte, would be very well advised, as he is by far the largest shareholder in the other concerns, to——"

Dennis couldn't be bothered to listen any more. The Commercial Secretary dribbled on about share issues, and guaranteed preference debenture holders. He didn't try to take it in, he felt exhilarated and filled with immense overflowing energy.

"Will you come round to the chancery on Tuesday and I will have the draft agreement prepared?" Mr. Cog asked.

He saw an end to the boring conversation. "Count on me!" he shouted, slapping the little man on the back, and wandered off to the verandah ball room.

He stood at the entrance, swaying very slightly. The band seemed worked up. They were playing a waltz—*The Blue Danube*—in a manner that would have made Strauss choke, but which was wild, appealing, and full of passionate savagery. It was so far removed from the delightfully refined Viennese melody that he hardly recognised it until he heard the rich 'pom pom' in the refrain.

"I must dance," he cried aloud.

Annel, flaming in her crimson dress, came floating round the room towards him in the arms of a tall dark man covered in orders and medals.

Dennis stepped forward and seized her. "Cut in," he told her surprised partner.

Annel babbled a few unintelligible words, and her partner clicked his heels, bowed and withdrew.

Dennis, without a care in the world, swept off in rhythmic fire; Annel was a perfect dancer, she moulded her tingling

body to his. They swept into the music, into the feel of the band, of the lights, of the night, of madness itself, unconscious of the other people in the room, filled with an overpowering, crazy, passionate rapture. He felt her dark perfumed hair brush his face and in the shadowy part of the room kissed her wildly. They twirled, swirled, swam on cheek to cheek, oblivious of everything.

The music stopped suddenly, and while the other dancers stood still and applauded, Dennis and Annel flowed into the garden, down the path where strange scents of the flowers came in waves and fireflies floated past, on into the faintly illuminated gloom, through the dark archway of a banyan tree, on to the terrace where far below lay the capital, looking up at them from the night like thousands of cats, and beyond, through the tall silhouetted stems of palms, the ships' lights shimmered on the indigo water.

A little creeper-covered summerhouse stood at one end of the terrace. Once inside the dark, hot interior, Dennis caught Annel, pulling her close to him, kissing the olive face with wild burning kisses. He raised her dress and caught the soft warm flesh beneath—felt her teeth as she bit him painfully in the ear, and laughed a wild, savage, triumphant laugh. They fell to the ground. She clung to him shivering, yielding herself with an animal, overpowering lust that was even stronger than Dennis's.

Mrs. Curtis Herring, by a system of indescribably clever signals, drew her husband aside, away from the boisterous gathering. She led him to the dimly lit drawing-room of the slatted green blinds.

"Richard."

"Yes, dear?"

Mrs. Curtis Herring paused. Her husband waited, politely enquiring.

"Kitty was talking to me a few minutes ago. Dennis Pask has proposed to her. She has accepted him."

Mr. Herring remained silent, expressionless. He walked towards his wife and touched her white-gloved hand with his—a small gesture, but Mrs. Herring knew what it meant.

That he shared her joy in the knowledge that the strange passion for the bull-fighter was no longer a bomb hanging perpetually over their heads, a bomb which for months now had been sitting on the dinner-table, lying on the drawing-room carpet ticking away. Richard would sometimes look at his daughter, wishing she would let it explode, tell them why she cried up there in her room, why she hung about desperately, pathetically waiting. But the code by which they lived forbade scenes, forbade unseemly emotion.

Six years before, in China, Mr. Herring had got up from the bed where he had been kneeling and put the small white hand he had been holding back under the covers, quietly walked away with great dignity, the doctor and the two nurses standing respectfully back to let him pass.

With a solemn grandeur he had held his wife's hand and kissed Kitty, smiling sadly. "You're all I have," he had told her, and added with that tiny break in his voice that told his wife her husband's heart was broken, "now . . ."

Mr. Herring walked with his wife towards the door of the drawing-room.

"I think, dear, you should talk to Madame Charnet. I thought she looked offended you had not been over to her table."

"Yes, dear, I will."

They paused at the doorway but neither spoke. Mr. Herring took his wife's gloved hand again, but this time he gripped it.

Dennis and Annel lay on the floor of the summerhouse, oblivious to the danger of snakes, his arm round her waist. They both smoked peacefully.

"I am afraid I hurt you," he said at length. "I didn't know it was like that."

She put her hand over his mouth and pulled him closer. "I haf kept myself for the man I love," she whispered huskily, and there was music in her voice.

In tune with the beauty of the night Dennis kissed her on the hair. He felt pleasantly tired, at ease.

"You old sausage, you're only kidding me."

"You still think I am a seller-bitch?" she queried in the same soft, gentle voice.

"I don't know what to think about you, but I have enough sense to know that all this is some sort of game—you are after something."

"You speak so fast, cara, I can't understand."

'Oh well,' Dennis reflected, 'I haven't fallen for her, I might as well make the best of all the honey when it's going.'

"What does 'cara' mean?" he asked lazily.

"Darling. But to us it is more than darling. You English say darling to everyone, always, but in Valupez we only say darling to the man we love."

"Cara can't be a common word in Valupez," Dennis replied, chuckling at his own wit.

She disregarded his remark and spoke low, intensely, "I want to have something of yours to keep so I will always be able to think of you, wherever you are."

Dennis smiled in the dark. Little gold-digger! This was the catch. This girl commercialised everything—even her first affair. She only did it because I was rude to her, didn't see any other way of getting me. He smiled again. But she hasn't got me now.

He felt in his trouser pocket and found a little gilt match-box a bookmaker had given him as a Christmas present. It held a book-match case and he had found it useful for evenings. He tossed it over to her.

"It's got an inscription on the back," he told Annel. "'Four-fivers Telex London'—it's Welsh for 'I love you more than London'."

Annel took it and pulled her bag off the seat where she had thrown it, fumbled in it.

"This is the only thing I bought with my own money. I win it at a cock fight when I am only sixteen and I love it more than anything else anyone give me."

She pressed the object into his hand. He felt by the shape it was either a compactum or a cigarette case. He reflected in the same humorous vein, 'So Valupez is not without its Sixpenny Bazaars.'

But when he looked at it by the flickering electric light of his bedroom he saw it was of heavy gold with the word

'Annel' written in tiny diamonds, and he felt sorry he had given her the bookmaker's match-case. Then he laughed as he threw his clothes off.

"It's all part of the game. She's just out to make a fool of me." He beat his fists on his wet hairy chest, and looked at his torn face in the mirror. "But she won't catch me."

He slipped under the mosquito netting without troubling to put on pyjamas and stretched himself, lay sweltering, considering the events of the night. Suddenly he shouted, "Kitty, my God!" and then laughed drunkenly, then stopped suddenly and scratched his head. He had remembered, vividly, the little locket on the thin gold chain.

He sat up in bed sobered by shock, stared in front of him, shivering.

"What have I done now?" he muttered. "What in hell have I done now? I have cheated, broken all the rules. Annel—— No, she doesn't matter. She's a trooper—hard, scheming, probably kidding me some way. But Kitty—I've robbed a church . . ."

He stared before him at the white net, strange feverish tremblings running through him. "I must have been crazy." His head swam, his mind twisting in spirals.

The cold, treacherous sea wind blew over him as he slept naked on top of the bed. The sea wind. The Valupians barred their windows against it. Les Ganger they called it—the wind of decay.

6

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 16TH

LONG JOHN shouted at Dennis across the quiet of the hotel lounge.

"Hullo!" Dennis shouted back.

"Come over and meet the gang."

Dennis walked across the green rush mats and joined the group.

"This is the great Sturn, the archbishop of the Sun Ripe Fruit Company—meet Dennis Pask."

The tall, poker-faced man smiled in a pally way at Dennis.

"John tells me you have come out to sell England to Valupez."

"And this is Pop Seitz—Sturn's Number Two."

"Pleased to meet you," Pop remarked, shaking hands.

"And this chap"—he indicated a dark, good-looking boy—"has been here so long he's forgotten what he's here about."

The handsome stranger stepped forward from the cool gloom of the hall and gave Dennis a vice-like grip.

"Andy Richards's the name. Representative of the Stevenson Locomotive Company, Detroit."

Sturn looked at Dennis and winked.

"We don't believe there is such a concern. Have you ever heard of a locomotive works in Detroit?"

Dennis confessed he hadn't and they all laughed.

"That's right, boys," Sturn declared. "He hasn't heard of it." He nudged Richards. "See, you can't pull this locomotive stuff over us—you're just here to give the birds a drink."

A few minutes later the jolly party had introduced Dennis to a concoction called a Mint Julep.

"It's an acquired taste," Long told him as Dennis grimaced. "The Yanks sold it me years ago and it's my Christian name now."

Sturn bent forward. "He always calls us Yanks, and Andy here is the only Yank of the bunch. Polite bastards, the English!"

They all laughed.

"Andy's a drummer," Sturn continued.

Dennis looked questioningly at Long.

"A commercial traveller," he translated.

"Yep," Pop agreed, "a persuader of the innocent. His company spend millions of dollars to keep him here so he can sell the Vlup girls the story that his wife doesn't understand him."

"You must not believe what Pop says," Andy smiled. "He's jealous because he has got spliced up to the only woman in Vlup who squints."

"There he goes," Pop chuckled, "pushing that old crack over. Always tells strangers the same. He can't get over Annel Del Monte asking me to go camping with her."

"Yep," Sturn smiled, the idea pleasing him. "She was mighty sorry when Pop called off. She'd bought a limousine and camping outfit and Pop never showed on the date."

Dennis looked at them. "I didn't know she went as far as that."

His innocent remark was met with a howl.

Long John indicated Pop with his pipe stem. "Don't you believe it; 'Kinkio' wouldn't speak to him."

"That's right!" Sturn interjected. "She has her code: Nothing over five cents. The million dollar rat."

"Why are you all so bitter against her?" Dennis answered. "She's not so bad as all that."

They looked at each other.

Long answered for the boys. "It depends what you call bad. She gets all the boys crazy about her and sucks every penny she can out of them, and when they're dry walks out."

Sturn looked at Dennis. "Seriously, don't you believe them. She's a very nice girl. They're all jealous because she won't know them. Now I think of it, she rang me up the other day. Yep, sir. She says, 'We Vlups don't cotton much to the Ameraños, but I saw *you*, señor, slicing bananas in a swamp plantation. There were so many flies on you I guessed right away you were the boy I've been waiting for all my life. Come up and see me sometime."

It was late. They sat in their shirt-sleeves in Dennis's gaudy suite. The pool of the evening at their poker game. They had started with a jack pot double stakes, no one had opened, it had gone to a queen pot then kings, aces, aces coming down. When it reached knaves again Sturn had opened for the maximum.

Pop remarked languidly, "I'll chase my luck," and shoved forward the chips. Long sweetened, doubting Sturn's original bet.

Andy debated, then said, glancing at his hand critically, "Seems it's up to me to double again."

Dennis shoved out some chips. "I've run out. What shall I do?"

"Shove in that pencil," Long suggested. "We won't forget."

"I'll just boost it up again," Sturn told them, and so it went on till Dennis had in front of him his watch, handkerchief and a box of matches all indicating dollar bills.

The raising stopped and Dennis, who was dealer, enquired of Sturn how many cards.

"I'll have five cards."

They all sat back and looked at him.

"Can't a guy take a new deck if he wants to?"

"Yes," Dennis said, "but what about your openers—a pair of jacks?"

"Wal, you're right there. If I don't show them at the end I pay the pool. That's the rule. But there's nothing against a guy trying to better himself at poker that I have ever heard."

They looked curiously at Sturn. There was that tautness that grows in a friendly game when the stakes go up.

Dennis dealt Sturn the five cards and he shuffled them together neatly and placed an ash tray on them without looking at the faces.

Pop wanted two and Long one.

Andy looked round the table. "As we're all bluffing I think I'll join in and play these."

Dennis drew four to an ace and found he had two pairs ace high.

"Opener's bet," Long remarked, and they all watched Sturn critically. He took the cards from under the ash tray one by one, looking at each carefully, then smiled.

"Opener's a pair of jacks," he remarked, showing the faces, and threw his hand on the table, sitting back unconcerned, lighting a new cigar.

"I'll breathe," Pop suggested.

"No breathing in a jack pot," Andy declared.

"O.K. I'll check."

Andy laughed. "Same thing. You can't check."

"O.K., then bet a chip."

"I'll make it ten," Long said, looking casually at his hand.

Dennis noticed Andy's fingers were trembling.

"Ain't no limit this time?" he asked.

"Who said there ain't no limit?" Pop enquired.

"That's right," Sturn intervened, "we agreed no limit on last hand—it's a rule of the house, you ought to know, Pop."

"Yes, I knew O.K.—no harm in trying things. Who are you, anyway, to talk, drawing five to a jack open."

"I'll try a C note," Andy said casually.

"That's ninety you raise or a hundred and ten."

"A hundred and ten in all," Andy spoke with suppressed excitement.

"Sounds as if he had caught something," Sturn declared.

"Catch a cold when he sees mine," Long answered.

"What about England?" Pop enquired.

Dennis couldn't understand their play. He felt his two pairs had a chance.

"I'll have a squint." He fished about in his pocket for another token.

"I wouldn't worry them with your two pairs," Sturn suggested, rolling his cigar about in his mouth.

"Who said I had two pairs?"

"Nobody said nothing, but you looked two pairs. You get to know guys, sonny. Pop looks a pair of aces, Long John looks all over a busted flush, and Andy smells full house to me."

"He smells doll scent to me," Pop jerked out.

"Here you are." Dennis flung Annel's cigarette case on the table. "I'll see you."

"I'm yellow," Pop answered, throwing his hand away, "and three of the biggest fours you guys ever saw."

"Pop goes the weasel," Sturn answered. "You have nerve—threes. If you turned them up now they wouldn't make more than a pair of tens."

"Who's driving the boat anyway, me or you?"

Long wasn't looking at the others, but his eyes were fixed on the cigarette case. He looked at Dennis curiously but did not speak.

"Come on, John, you gone loco?" Andy enquired.

"There you are, boys, he can't get his mind off those trucks he's aiming to sell," Sturn rolled from back of his cigar.

"I'll see you," Long John spoke absently, his mind had left the game.

"Full house any good?" Andy asked triumphantly.

"Depends how high."

"Tens and jacks?" Andy queried anxiously.

"Pity," the planter answered. "I am high." He flung his hand down on the table—three kings and two fives.

"Too bad, Andy," Pop snapped in. "Ain't you reaping the harvest, John?"

But John shoved the chips in the middle. "No. We'll have a cold hand for it all round."

"Who's loopy now?" Andy smiled. "Pick it up, Long, I want to get stuck into that planter's punch."

"No," Long John said firmly. "We'll play a cold hand."

"Doesn't anybody want to know what I have?" Dennis asked.

"That's right," Sturn soliloquised, "nobody's seen Master England and he's put in some real chips, too. Look at that case—gold and diamonds. Sissy's low field for it."

Long put out his hand and picked up Dennis's variegated collection of tokens, taking care that the others couldn't see the case closely.

"I'll count them for you—I expect you have lost."

Dennis laughed. "Yes, I have only two pairs."

"What did I tell you?' Sturn cried, pleased at his sum-' mary of Dennis's hand.

Long picked up the pack and started dealing round.

"What you think you're playing at?" Andy asked. "You won the money."

Long laughed. "Den here dealt Sturn six cards—he didn't notice when we opened and then was too decent to spoil the game. That's why he took five new ones. I call it bloody sporting."

"So do I," Dennis enthused. "I am awfully sorry."

Sturn laughed. "Last guy I saw doing that got his arm broken, remember, Pop?"

"Yer," Pop answered unblushingly, "that was the night yer went to the English Legation Dance without yer pants."

"It comes back to me."

Andy joined in. "Yer told them you were Gandhi."

"That's right," Sturn answered, without a twitch on his face. "Mr. Herring tells me he's afraid the English are ill-treating my folks back in India."

Long laughed. "You mustn't believe a word they say, Den, but they do know our form. What shall it be? the whole pack—keep back two?"

"Suits me," from Pop.

Andy put his hand out to stop Long. "Take the dough, John, don't be so awfully, frightfully sporting." He had imitated Dennis's accent magnificently, it was impossible to take offence at their good-natured banter. Dennis roared with the others.

He was new to this continuous form of kidding but found it amusing, and the whole party was a change from the good taste and gentleness of Maison Herring.

Long dealt ten cards each, and Dennis, after sorting them about in different directions, put down his hand.

"A full house my best."

Sturn looked at his hand. "You must find poker an expensive sport," he commented. "Can't you see you have a straight flush?"

"So I have." Dennis felt rather foolish. They all seemed so much smarter than he.

"That about scoops the pool," Pop remarked, "unless Andy can fix up more."

"No sir." Andy threw his hand down. "A pair of deuces and a busted straight's my strength. What about this punch? Get shaking, John."

They moved over to the central table which was arranged with the ingredients for Long's speciality 'planter's punch'. Long pushed the orchids to one side.

"From Ruberio?" he queried.

"I don't know," Dennis answered, "they were a present."

Long looked at him again curiously, but said nothing.

"Here's my recipe, and it's the best in the tropics. Old Scotch Mac gave it me when I came out here, now don't you forget it. One of sour, one of sweet, three of strong, four of weak, and a little grated nutmeg."

Dennis watched him as he poured the ingredients into the punch bowl—the lime, black sugar, rum, soda, and the final grating of nutmeg. He took the glass ladled out to him and tasted the concoction. It was cold and did not appear strong.

"I want to do something nobody else can do for me," Long requested.

Dennis led him through his bedroom to the elaborate chromium and tiled bathroom.

"What's happened about your company, Den?"

"It's all rather complicated. Mr. Del Monte is forming a foundation company to control all the British concerns out here. He says they will be in a firmer position to negotiate with the Government."

Long looked at him over his shoulder. "You say that like a parrot. He has been getting round you. No, don't say anything, listen to me. I've been in this bloody hole years longer than any other Britisher. After Scotch Mac died I was the only British planter in the state. Recently there's an idiot—Brander—trying to grow sugar. He won't last long. He couldn't run a coffee-stall let alone a sugar plantation. But I'll hand him this. He's the white-haired boy of this party, doesn't keep Vlup women, and won't mix with us drinking, gambling boys. There's not three hundred Britishers in this dump. There's the Legation and Consular office, and quite a bevy of missionaries and their spawn, and maybe a coupla hundred poor whites—beachcombing, or gone native, or working in the Vlup railway. That's all John Bull's children. This bunch you met to-night is the pick of the Yanks, and they're good chaps. There's some very decent Swedes, Germans and Dutch with scattered plantations, but they're all set to make a bit of ready and get home. They work twenty-five hours out of the twenty-four and have no time to pal up with us. Though, of course, we all stick together during the revolutions."

Long walked into the bedroom and pushing the mosquito net away slumped down on the bed.

"I've taken trouble to explain the position carefully so you will follow me. Now I expect you think I have got my knife into Mr. Herring and the Legation crowd. Well, I

haven't. They think I am a swine, and they're right. I am. But what they can't see, understand, is that they're only here for a few years, I am here for good. Now Mr. Herring is a very nice man, a gentleman with a great sense of honour, with a desire to be diplomatic and do the best he can in the interests of G.B., and the Commercial Secretary is the same—a very nice, honourable chap trying his best." Long raised his voice. "But the Vlups don't understand honour and being decent and wanting to do the best for everybody all round. Their idea is to be as dirty as they can, and they think us English are nuts. But"—he pushed his pipe stem into Dennis's ribs—"nuts which can be milked. Follow me?"

Dennis nodded.

"Now I am trying to help you, not because I particularly like you—you're a type I've grown out of touch with and, frankly, I can't understand it—not because I want to get any money out of you or your company. Money would be no good to me now. Do you believe me?"

Dennis nodded again.

"I want to help you because I don't want to see these bloody Vlups get away with it. They have pulled enough smart ones over the British, it's time we put a smart one over them.

"Look here, Den, you think I'm a drunken, broken-down, banana-grubber, but I'm British back of me, and I've watched these Vlups use our Union Jack as toilet-paper for twenty years and I think it's time we did something to show we aren't soft, aren't washed out altogether." He paused, and then added slowly, "Can't you see, deep down in me, I think Britain is the only nation in the world? I love it and won't stand for these Dagoes laughing at it."

Dennis mopped the sweat off his face. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go and bluff Del Monte. Go to him and say firmly that you have a cable from home. They're too badly organised at the G.P.O. to check up. Tell him Red Mountains have had a big offer from an American syndicate to buy them out. Be firm, listen to nothing, and you have got him boxed.

Rather than let the Ameranos in he will murder his grandmother. See, you have him by the shortest hair. He's not going to lose his chance of a fortune. He knows the Americans won't stand his graft. He'll climb down, make the Government take off the taxes so the company can carry on. All these bloody politicians are in together, none of them will dare let the Ameranos get the concession."

"Who shall I say has made the offer?"

"Say the United Mineral Corporation. That's one point about being British; he thinks you're far too dumb to have invented it, he won't follow it up."

"Right," Dennis said firmly, "I will do it."

Long rose and clapped him on the back. "Good scout! Oh, by the way, here's your things." He handed back the odds and ends Dennis had used as poker markers. "I am sorry," he said, "you have fallen for that girl."

"I haven't. She gave me the case, but there is a catch in it somewhere. I will find out soon enough."

Long walked to the window and looked out on the dirty square. A cold night breeze came in gusts from the sea and made the grubby palms rattle like dry brown flesh-shrinking bones on a gibbet. He seemed to be musing, reasoning with himself. At last he spoke.

"I don't know why, but when there's only one flower in a desert everybody wants to pick it. Maybe she can't help herself, maybe it's not her fault to make the best of her luck." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the living-room where the other members of the party were singing 'The Old Grey Mare she ain't what she used to be'. "They'd all give their eyes for her. All except Sturn, he's different. Still, there's something a bit extra about this Annel kid."

"She doesn't move me," Dennis answered thickly, rather drunk.

The planter looked at him keenly, searchingly. "No," he said at length, crossly, "I suppose you with all your smart English girl-friends think she's not much. Let me tell you, there's been more ruberio spilt over that woman than any girl since Helen of Troy."

"What's ruberio?"

John laughed and walked to the door of the outer room. "It's not a word that one can translate into English. It means blood—bloodshed for no purpose. It means innocent blood. You can't translate it. It's bad—a word from human sacrifice and devilry. That's why they call these mountains Ruberio. We translate them as the Red Mountains, but they don't mean that. In the old days they were filled with cut-throats who would string men up to posts with a slow fire below them, and the women tear their guts out for fun. The word is used to imply that they are devilish mountains, the home of all evil and beastliness."

7

THURSDAY, AUGUST 17TH

AFTER Long and his friends had gone Dennis went back to his room and looked out of his window where the cold gusts of sea wind made him shiver. But he rather liked it. He was desperately hot, his shirt stuck to his hairy chest, and he stood, glass in hand, letting the intense cold needles of wind caress his sweating body, making him shiver till his teeth rattled.

His brain was fuddled with punch. He felt somehow a desire to pull himself together, to review his position, find out where he was, how he was heading. A remark of Sturn's to John as they went downstairs rang in his brain. "Nice chap, your English friend," Sturn had said, and added, "About as sharp as a tennis ball."

They were right. He was a born chump, a B.F. without any sense, unable to weigh up his fellow human beings.

An idea drifted through his mind that he would write to Orina and tell her he forgave her. That's what she had wanted to know that day at the wedding, whether he forgave her or not. What had he got to forgive her? She had done him no harm. He didn't believe really that she was a gold-digger.

He threw the empty glass out of the window and heard it smash on the concrete carriage-way at the entrance of the hotel.

No, she hadn't liked him, hated the scars on his face, been sickened by them. She had told him honestly that she had only accepted him in the first place to get away from her immediate surroundings. But that didn't help him, being honest. He wanted to be liked for himself, loved passionately by some beautiful girl.

He wandered back to the other room and ladled himself out another glass of punch. That's what he wanted, to be loved for himself, then he'd settle down and be happy. Annel—she had told him she loved him, the only woman in the world who had ever told him that; he swallowed half the tumbler—and she was a rotten little fraud, a kinkio, a rat, that bit.

"Tennis nets." He laughed drunkenly and refilled his glass. "I wonder if she was a virgin. I don't really know enough about these things. Besides, I was tight—am tight now—stinking."

He wandered back to the window in his bedroom and threw the second glass out, laughing feebly.

"No, of course she wasn't—it's all part of the song and dance."

Babe—she liked him. He looked foolishly round the room and then shouted, "I killed the only girl who ever cared for me—killed her, do you hear?"

He paused. No one answered. Everything was still except for the dirty palms outside, their jagged leaves rubbing together like a ghostly crowd moving down the road. Dennis put his hands in front of his eyes, shivering. His head burned and he swayed.

"There's a great army coming to kill me, shuffling down the road with bloodstained scythes."

He ran back to the living-room and holding the bowl up in his hands, swallowed great gulps of the liquid. It ran down his chin on to his washing tussore. He set the bowl back. He felt steadier.

It suddenly occurred to him that there had been a letter for him just before he went to meet the boys. He searched round the room but couldn't find it, then remembered it was inside his pocket. He took out and looked at the crumpled sheet by the jumpy electric light.

"British Legation,
"Tieste de Page.

"Darling,

"I wish I could have seen you before you went last night. I don't know whether I am standing on my head or my heels, it all happened so quickly. I do want to tell you things. One can't write how much I love you, for instance . . ."

There was more, but Dennis stumbled to his bedroom.

"Oh, I am a cad, a cad. Dirty swine! What a fool, what an idiot I have been!"

He kicked off his shoes and threw his clothes on the floor and got into bed where he lay shivering and coughing, then he laughed a loud, ghastly laugh, unearthly to hear, and muttered through his shaking, chattering teeth, "Even she is kidding me on. She loves a bull-fighter!" and he laughed again, a laugh that made the little Dutch commercial traveller shudder in the adjoining room, for it was like the laugh of a dying man.

Caesare Del Monte greeted Dennis the next morning warmly. Dennis found him difficult to understand, but he gathered from the flow of his conversation that the parent company was well under way, it only required Dennis to write a little note to Monsieur Whyte.

Dennis braced himself. "I had a cable from Stephen Whyte this morning."

"Oh yes? No bad news, I hope?"

"No, good news. He has an offer from the United Mineral Corporation for his holding in the company." Dennis, with a subtleness he didn't know he possessed, fumbled about inside his pocket looking apparently for the cable. "I must have left it at the hotel, but that's what it said."

Caesare smiled non-committally, but Dennis, with an unusual flash of insight, knew that he believed him and that he was worried.

Caesare went to the embroidered bell-rope that hung near the door and gave it a conventional tug—conventional

because, without waiting for an answer, he opened the door and shouted volubly to someone at the other side of the house. "We will have a little wine," he told Dennis, and in a very short time a white-coated boy appeared with a bottle of champagne, a bottle of brandy and two glasses.

Caesare waved his pudgy hand in the direction of the red plush-covered table where the boy had set the glasses. "A leetle elevens—very English the elevens." He seemed pleased with the word. He poured Dennis out a glass of the warm sweet champagne and laced it handsomely with brandy.

After they had discussed banal topics through two glasses of the strange mixture, Del Monte clapped Dennis on the back.

"My boy," he said, smiling a flash of gold, "my boy, you must not let your cousin do this thing till you haf seen the mines. You do not know what treasures are there."

Dennis shivered. He felt hot, clammy, and his head ached. Del Monte was falling into the trap. He would go to the mine—after all that was one of the reasons for his visit to Valupez; he would keep Caesare on tenterhooks over the bogus cable. It was a waiting game. When he had tried all his wiles, and saw Dennis was firm, he would square the Government, make them remove the taxes and the company could carry on, keeping this American Sword of Damocles hanging over Del Monte's greasy head.

"It's no good," Dennis told him. "I am sure now Stephen's made up his mind he won't alter, but as I am in the country it would be silly to leave without seeing these mines."

"Quite right." Caesare clapped him on the back. "I will arrange everything. We will leave by the morning train to-morrow."

He poured Dennis out another glass of champagne, but did not lace it with brandy. He felt now he had gained his objective it was senseless to waste further money on this boy. The champagne would not keep and was nearly finished.

"Is Annel at home?" Dennis asked casually.

"No, she is away from home," Caesare lied. He might need her as a last persuasive card and something she had said about Dennis frightened him. It would never do for

his beautiful daughter to fall in love with an Englaise, to fall in love with anybody. He could not afford to lose her.

Dennis had drifted into the Valupian habit of the siesta and lay, after lunch, sweating and shivering on his bed. He had fallen into a troubled sleep when the telephone rang. The Valupian telephones rang in occasional dribbles all day long, but that, Dennis had found, meant nothing. When they rang continuously for several minutes it was safe to presume that somebody was calling or it was at any rate a wrong number.

He lifted the receiver and Annel's voice came to him through the cracks and buzzes.

"I am from a voca an filba publia," she told him.

This, Dennis knew, meant a public call-box and whatever was going to be said must be told quickly or they would be rung off.

"Will you meet me at the far end of the Boulevard Mastador, twenty-three hours this night?"

"Why?"

"I must see you."

Dennis shivered again, the spice of adventure appealed to him.

"Right. I'll be there."

"I will be in my auto." She paused and the telephone hummed and screeched in Dennis's ear. He made out her voice, low but distinct. "You still think the same, cara?"

Dennis didn't know what to answer, partly because he didn't know what he did think.

"You are not sorry?"

"Hell no."

"I think the same also. Did you hear that?"

Dennis didn't know what he was supposed to hear as with Valupian telephonic suddenness they were cut off.

Sleep was now out of the question. He rang the bell marked with the picture of a man in evening clothes and labelled Folenda, Garçon, Kelner, Waiter.

"Fetch us up a bottle of gin and some iced tonic."

"At once, Señor," a squeaky voice answered.

Dennis tried several times to get the Legation but Valupian numerals were still beyond him. He hung up the receiver in disgust. When the waiter arrived he got him to ring the number and after innumerable delays a breathless Kitty arrived at the telephone.

"Hullo. It's Dennis."

"Hullo. It's Kitty."

"I say, can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Well, look here, I have to go up to the mines for a few days. I'll see you when I get back."

"Oh what a frightful bore. Daddy was fixing a party."

"Never mind, we will have it when I get back."

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes, it was sweet of you writing?"

"Do you agree?"

Dennis remembered that he hadn't read the letter, only a few words at the beginning.

"I'll talk it over with you when I get back."

"Will it be all right, do you think?"

He glanced round to see if he could find the letter and know what this was about, but couldn't, so murmured "Of course."

"Oh you are an angel."

Dennis wished now he had read it.

"Dennis, still love me?"

"Yes, of course."

"You are a poppet. I have a frightful lot to tell you. All the most amazing things have been happening."

"Well tell me when we meet. I'll ring you as soon as I get back."

"Bye, darling."

"Good-bye, car——" he corrected himself. There was some reason he mustn't use that word. "Cheerio!" he altered it to and rang off.

When he got out of bed to help himself to a drink his head was splitting and he felt he was going to faint. The sweat poured from him and he staggered, shivering, about the room. The stiff gin revived him, he went back to bed and fell into a feverish sleep.

But old horrors returned. He was lying there in the broiling sun, and the great vultures stood round him in a ring. He was dead. He knew that he had been dead for some days. The hair was growing on his face although he was dead. Why didn't they come and tear out his eyes? Start eating him? But they wouldn't, somebody was keeping them off. He couldn't see who it was. He thought it was Babe and called to her, "Don't be silly, they must have me in the end," but when she answered it was Orina. "I won't let them have you till you have forgiven me." He tried to tell her he had forgiven her, but a horrible eerie voice kept shouting in his ear, "You're dead. I won't let you speak any more."

Dennis paced the far dark end of the boulevard. He was still early for his tryst. It was deserted. The lamps were so far apart that great pools of blackness lay between them.

The avenue of palms rustled eerily. Dennis remembered that somebody had warned him against this place, full of footpads. After a quarter of an hour he started strange fancies that the rustling of the palms were men creeping about with knives in the dark wasteland behind the feeble rays of light from the standards. He began to turn his head sharply, expecting at any moment to see someone rush out of the darkness at him with a raised machete. He started as he saw a figure come down the road towards him, the flickering lights made it look larger than life.

A giant negro in torn cotton clothes slouched along. When he was a standard away, Dennis saw his eyes gleam white and then he became lost in the shadow between them. Dennis nerved himself, he was unarmed, and looking round he could see no suitable weapon to hand. He saw the figure appearing again into the pool of light from his own standard. He stood back, waiting, but the figure stopped suddenly on seeing Dennis and stood looking intently, his ragged straw hat pushed up on the greasy black wool of his head. They were only twenty yards apart, and they stood watching each other for perhaps half a minute, then the negro turned and slouched back the way he had come.

The car arrived so quietly that the hoot made Dennis

jump. He turned and saw Annel leaning out. He went to her and got in. She threw her arms round his neck and kissed him; there was something hot, exciting about her. Dennis drew her to him, absorbing her. He kissed her eyes, her throat, her hair unconsciously, he didn't know what he was doing, and she kissed him back. They separated at length.

Annel looked fearfully up the road and then down through the rear window of her small car.

"You must not go to those mines."

"I must go," Dennis told her. "Surely you must want me to go. If the Ameranos buy the show it puts your father out of a job."

"I hate him," Annel hissed fiercely. "He is not my father. He adopted me when I was young. There is a long story. It doesn't matter. His wife was a great heiress and she died and he pretends I am her daughter. I find out one day it is not so. I don't know who I am, that's why I am so—what you say?"

"Savage?" Dennis replied thoughtfully.

She laughed. "Savage like a puma. Do you know what they call me?"

"No," Dennis said politely.

"Kinkio le rat." She laughed again. "Do you think I am a rat?"

"They say so—I wouldn't know," he shrugged.

"Caesare is not so very clever as he think. As soon as he tell me about the Ameranos buying concessions I go and find out there has been no cable for you, no radio. You bluff." She laughed. "All day he is planning traps for you at these mines—and you don't go. You bluff him again."

'There is some reason,' Dennis thought, 'they don't want me to go to their mines. Now he has put his daughter on with a lot of cock and bull stories to make me alter my plan, but I'll go.'

"Is there a back seat in this car of yours?"

"Yes, yes—and a rug."

He felt her knee against his quiver.

"Well," he said, "what are we waiting for?"

He caught her up in his arms and bundled over the front seat to the back of the car . . .

The faintest streaks of dawn were showing over the sea when Annel woke Dennis. He had fallen asleep on her breast and she had not woken him, but let him lie there through the night, stroking his hair and building aerial skyscrapers for the future.

Dennis had slept peacefully. His face relaxed, the beauty which had been torn away by the scars returned to him, and some of the old *joie de vivre* and freshness. He felt glad and young when he woke and kissed Annel fondly. It was the last time in his life he was ever to feel the warmth of life.

Annel dropped him at his hotel.

"You won't go?" she said, and Dennis smiled. Why spoil a perfect night by telling her she was a crook set on him by her father to cheat him.

'No,' he thought, 'I won't spoil the illusion even though I know it isn't true.'

He kissed her hand gallantly and she touched his lightly with her finger tips, lookingly intently at his face.

"You are very beautiful to me," she said, and then a thought striking her, "You have guns?"

"Not even an air pistol," Dennis laughed.

She fumbled in her bag and gave him a small mother-of-pearl revolver.

"Don't let anybody see it, and you won't go, cara?"

There seemed nobody about. Dennis bent forward and kissed her.

"No," he said, "I won't go."

8

FRIDAY, AUGUST 18TH

CAESARE DEL MONTE and Dennis jumped and rocked in the sketchy train of the Valupez State Railway. They meandered past miles and miles of flat country with occasional groups of buildings and indescribably dirty villages. The fields were covered with weeds through which bananas struggled. The roads were huge ruts down which sometimes they saw men lashing lean bullocks in wooden carts filled with cut banana bunches. Hours they stopped at the small innumerable

stations waiting for passengers or delivering freight. Most of the countryside seemed burnt to powder, a red burning dust lay over everything—bananas, grass and tumbledown houses—blew everywhere, forcing them to keep the windows shut.

Dennis's head swam, his eyes seemed burning and his brain was tortured. He felt miserable, cold and hot in turns, and underneath it all a feeling that he had messed everything up irretrievably.

Del Monte explained the wisdom of the Government under his leadership as President. He had forbidden any form of road linking up Tieste De Page with Palago, thus all passengers and freight from the principal agricultural district had to go by the State Railway and, as he explained, "It must pay, because we can charge any fare we like."

Beyond Palago lay the great plain of Kelbi which the Ameranos were developing rapidly, making their own motor roads, and Del Monte told Dennis with regret that his successor in the presidency had been foolish enough to allow them to bring their own locomotives and refrigerator vans and use the Government track at a stipulated rate. "But," he smiled, "we make it as slow as possible for them."

At a red hot corrugated iron-roofed village with the comic name of Zanco the train stopped for lunch, and a general siesta. Dennis reflected if one travelled at all in Valupez it was best to travel with the ex-President because one got the few comforts that were going.

Dennis drank a great deal of the local red wine at lunch and managed to eat the peculiar native dish, an oily mess of some sort of meat, eggs and capsicums. Like everything else in this section it was burning hot and made him sweat even more if such a thing was possible.

After lunch Dennis tried to sleep in the coach which was, in the mid-day sun, like the interior of a vast oven. On top of this there was the perpetual stink of Del Monte himself and his filthy cigars.

Just as Dennis was falling into a worried snooze Caesare woke him up, to start a long and persistent argument that he should cable from the railhead at Palago to Stephen, making him drop the American sale idea at once. Dennis refused

flatly and told Del Monte firmly that unless he was satisfied with the mine and saw some prospect of a reduction in export tax he would wire on his return to accept the deal. Caesare shrugged and, spreading a whitish handkerchief over his face, went to sleep. The heat did not seem to worry him.

Dennis watched a large and grubby plantation jerking past the window; the principal crop seemed bushes with peculiar shaped fruit. It was difficult to make out the foliage as, like everything else, it was drenched in red dust, but he thought they might be cocoa. After this they came on a long stretch of uncultivated land, but carelessly grazed by threadbare cattle, some vague descendants of Herefords—at least they seemed red, and some of them had dirty white faces. The pasture, if one could call it that, was seared by dried water-courses and strewn with large red boulders; there were few flowers, but golden wild oranges glowed from dust-laden trees, and occasional tree ferns seemed able to keep green in spite of the dust and drought. Dennis noted rough, palm-thatched huts and suspected it must be in different ownership as occasional fences of loosely hung barbed wire appeared to mark off adjoining properties.

After the first excitement of the wild oranges and tree ferns wore off Dennis got bored by the endless stretch of tangle and fell into a light sleep. When Caesare shook him he found it was dark and the train had stopped.

"Palago," Del Monte explained. "I haf booked us a suite for the night."

He directed black porters to carry their simple luggage and took Dennis to see the engine sheds and a turn-table, "Englaisa make", which were considered the show pieces of Palago.

Dennis started to shiver again. He learnt details about the number of State-owned locomotives and rolling stock, and that there was an English expert stationed at Palago named Smith, from Liverpool. They were rather surprised and hurt that Dennis did not know him. He had just left three days before for a visit of inspection to Balamina, four hundred kilometres away, connected by a branch line.

"Very beautiful town," Caesare told him, "the city of

roses and lovely women." (Caesare was fond of this tempting but inaccurate description.)

However, the official held in halting English that Palago was the most beautiful town in the country, and Caesare agreed that it was lovely also.

Dennis was glad to see that he was tiring of inspecting the locomotive sheds.

They fed and slept in a wooden hotel which, through the ravages of kinkios, had something wrong with the foundations and had a permanent list to port.

Dennis woke up in the middle of the night in a muck sweat and found he was badly bitten by some louse or bug. He dipped his sponge in the reddish water of the ewer and washed himself all over and collected at last a fat squashy bug which popped when he pressed it. He examined his bed to find several other playmates crawling lazily about. He despatched them but found he had got the shivers so badly that he couldn't go back to bed. He started walking about the room but the boards bent and creaked so loudly he was frightened they would give way altogether.

He had bought a bottle of rum the night before, and now determined he would not drink it. "I'll pull myself together," he told himself. "No more dope till I get back to England."

A great longing came over him to be home again, to see his mother and Stephen and Orina. A lump rose in his throat.

"Oh hell," he cried, and taking the bottle drank a tumblerful.

(*a*) AUGUST 19TH

They were on the go early next morning in a Ford V.8, speeding along a skiddy but well-constructed road of loose stones. On either side lay the plantations of the Sun Ripe Fruit Company; they were a treat for anyone who liked to see anything well done. The earth looked rich and full of power and desire to grow things. Square miles of bananas in every stage of growth flew past them. They were so beautifully cultivated and Dennis could not see a weed, even the edge of the fields was being cut by a tractor-drawn machine. Iron overhead troughs ran for miles bringing irrigation water down from the hills and emptied the reddish water into neatly kept

ditches between the fields. Every section had white posts with numbers, probably, Dennis thought, indicating acreage, date of planting and species of plantain.

Occasional clearings revealed neat whitewashed houses for the workers with well-kept gardens.

At first Dennis took great interest in this amazing spectacle of organisation over chaos; he was intrigued by the red cloven flower of the bananas, and speculated how many hands there were to the bunch. But after a little he felt his head again and began to shiver and break into prickly sweat.

Del Monte was back on the old warpath about cabling Stephen.

'I've never seen such a man, he won't seem to take no for an answer!'

In the end Dennis fell into a torpor between sleeping and waking, where he lay, his mouth open, rolling about in the bumpy car.

The new road came to an end at Odrimendo where they spent the night. Another hot, feverish, gasping night for Dennis, eked out with pulls at the rum bottle. He began to realise he must have caught something. He found it impossible to concentrate on anything. He didn't even worry to shave when he found it was morning.

(*b*) AUGUST 20TH

The paw-paw at breakfast refreshed him and the innkeeper made them planter's punch. He even had some ice from an American refrigerator.

They proceeded in a mule cart with red harness and tinkling bells over a seemingly impossible track. They were covering foothills now, mostly wild country with occasional native palm-leafed huts. In some of the valleys there were forests of tall trees, mahogany and cotton wood with peculiar shaped roots like the fleshy folds of a fat elephant. All the trees were covered with plants and Dennis noted flowering orchids. But he was losing grip of things. Each time he pulled himself back and tried to concentrate he found it harder.

The day passed away endlessly. Del Monte hardly spoke now and if he did it was only to ask Dennis to go back and

cable. But Dennis had drilled himself to stick out, although he longed to go back. His mind was now so confused he didn't know what he was doing.

They slept that night at a native village, Starinda. Dennis drank half a bottle of rum in his bedroom and slept on the floor. He felt the little revolver Annel had given him sticking into his leg, but he was too drunk, ill and tired to move.

During the night Del Monte crept into his room and searched all his belongings, even the jacket pocket that lay uppermost, but he did not dare turn Dennis over or look in the other pocket. However, he was satisfied that Dennis was unarmed.

In the morning Dennis found his hip unbearably painful where the revolver had been sticking into him all night. He examined the weapon and noted a revolving chamber which held six cartridges. Dennis took one out to look at and judged it about .22 calibre. His hand shook so much he dropped it and the copper cylinder rolled away into a crack in the floor where he was unable to scoop it out.

They rode all Thursday with two bearers, climbing steadily. About midday they saw from a ridge the Red Mountains, high blue peaks separated from them by a wide jungle-filled valley. They crossed this during the afternoon. Dennis had hoped the shade of the trees would make it cooler, but it steamed, which was worse. Twice he fainted and fell off. Caesare cursed him roundly in Valupian.

They camped that night at the foot of the Montabero Rubero. Caesare and Dennis lay in a stuffy tent close together, but he did not search him again, he was satisfied.

(*c*) AUGUST 22ND

When Dennis woke in the morning he felt rather better. It was early and comparatively cool. The sun was just rising over the valley they had crossed the day before. He noticed the two bearers had gone with their mules, but Caesare explained he had sent them back for water.

Caesare was quite a good cook and breakfast was a cheery meal. They cracked jokes, and Dennis laughed at Caesare's clothes. He wore an old lavender double-breasted city suit

with a pink striped linen shirt and a pair of rubber gum boots capped by a big sombrero. Dennis had brought riding breeches and polo boots which were useful as the grass of the hills was full of every manner of animal that bit and bit hard.

Dennis sat drinking the coffee, wondering if he hadn't perhaps worked through the fever, when Caesare resumed the attack, imploring him to return and cable. He told him to go to hell.

They stamped out the fire and Caesare explained they were at the end of their journey. He seemed quite pleasant; so pleasant that Dennis said:

"I am sorry if I've been obstinate, but I have made up my mind."

Del Monte shrugged and laughed. "You English!"

They set off on foot up a recently worn path. After they had walked half a mile they came to a dried lake filled with brown and white lumps. Dennis crumbled a piece off and tasted. It was rock salt.

Rounding the corner of the little bay they were crossing, Dennis found the dry lake stretched away as far as he could see. He asked Del Monte how far it was, but he didn't answer, he seemed preoccupied. They walked across the corner of the lake for about a quarter of a mile and Dennis noticed they were off the trail.

At the other side of the salt lake came a shore of large, smooth, khaki-coloured rocks and a steep barren bank rising nearly vertical for perhaps a couple of hundred feet. They climbed this on hands and knees in silence. Dennis saw Caesare was sweating more than he was. They sat down twenty feet from the top and looked at the big brine lake. Dennis noticed it was in the general shape of a saucer.

At length Del Monte spoke. "I will wait here. You go up and look over the edge and you will see the richest mine in the world."

Dennis set off. As he reached the top memories of climbing on the Isles of Foam came to him and he crawled carefully on hands and knees, worming the last few feet on his stomach. It was lucky he did so, for as his eyes came level with the top he found he was on an overhanging ledge with a drop of perhaps two thousand feet the other side.

He was so surprised that he did not hear Del Monte creeping up behind him. Very slowly he came, testing every foothold with the care of a stalking panther and with unaccountable nimbleness considering he was holding a heavy service revolver in his right hand.

Dennis looked up and down the canyon and picked out what he took to be the mine workings, some wooden poles and machinery, perhaps three miles away down the rocky bed. 'I wonder why Caesare took me this way. We will have to make a large detour to get down this cliff. It is impossible here, sheer suicide to try.'

Del Monte crept on.

9

SUNDAY, AUGUST 20TH

LONG JOHN'S boy handed him a glass of planter's punch. The early morning sun was racing into the sky to boil the country up again after the few hours of sweltering night.

"You sure they go up Monday?"

The boy nodded.

John knew that they had got three days' start. It might be too late.

The rubber-wheeled buggy was at the door with his two best mules. His head field hand stood beside it, hat in hand, waiting instructions. John explained to him clearly the work for the next few days, jumped in and was off, bumping along the rutty road to Zanco. Fourteen miles it was from John's plantation "Blighty" to Zanco—fourteen scorching miles of the worst track imaginable.

When Long had heard that the "Tall white" and Del Monte had gone up-country he knew at once there was something up. The mines of the Red Mountain Mineral Company were a hundred miles north of Tieste. The best way to reach them was to motor up the coast road to Zarlotto and then trek across country, a short ride of perhaps twenty-five miles. To try and reach the mines via Palago was like going to Southampton from London via Edinburgh. It didn't make sense.

He puzzled, as he drove, what on earth Del Monte could be up to. Nothing but the utmost urgency would have got

Caesare out of Tieste in the dry season. There could be no point in taking Dennis to visit the locomotive sheds at Palago or the derelict marble works at Balamina, nor was it likely that Caesare would take a foreigner deliberately to the great plain of Kelbi and show him how much better the Americans ran agriculture than the Valupians. There was nothing worth seeing at Odrimendo and less at Starinda. Yet that was where they were heading.

Past Starinda, about a day's journey, Long knew there was an old mine working in the Canyon of the Moon. He had an idea that Del Monte was taking Dennis there. But why?

There could be only one reason. He had swallowed the bluff and wanted to keep Dennis out of the way while he, Del Monte, fixed things up his way with a free hand. Life was so cheap in Valupez Long knew that if Caesare got the chance he would tip Dennis over a convenient cliff. Dead men don't fuss. Anybody can fall over a cliff. If he kept Dennis prisoner somewhere in the mountains it would be expensive, and when released again he would be bound to cause trouble. Then the employment of the professional bandits spelt big ransom moneys which would deplete the funds of this Stephen Whyte, and Long knew that Del Monte looked on Whyte's money as his own and guarded it carefully from minor crooks. Altogether things didn't look very bright for Dennis.

John whipped up the mules and the buggy bumped furiously forward. What a fool he had been to let this nit-wit schoolboy try and bluff Del Monte single-handed.

'I'll teach the oily swine he can't trot decent whites up into the mountains and knock them off. I'll show him us British aren't as dumb as he thinks.'

At Zanco he got on the telephone to Sturn, who was splendid.

"Don't worry, planter, I'll have an auto at the railhead and we'll drive through the night to my place at Odrimendo and I'll find us some way of getting on to Starinda where we will have to take pot luck for mules."

"We?" Long queried.

"Well, I am coming with you, ain't I?"

"You don't have to. It's nothing to do with you. Besides,

there might be a few squibs let off. If I happened to dust up our friend they might want me to leave the country. You had better stay out."

Sturn laughed. "You great pelican, what do you take me for? When I was in a jam at the revolution you were sitting on my doorstep with the milk."

"Oh hell!" Long said lazily, it was too hot to argue, and rang off.

But he meant to argue Sturn out of his decision later on; he knew that if there was any shooting the Valupians would jump at the incident as an excuse to clear out Sturn and the Sun Ripe Fruit Company.

He told the clerk to chalk up his ticket. Valupez languished under a system of petty credits, chits, endless bad debts.

Long strolled down the train to find a suitable carriage. Most Valupians travelled fourth class. The first-class accommodation was limited to one coach, one carriage of which, Long noticed, had the blinds drawn, and being of a curious disposition he kicked the door with his heavy field boot.

One of the blinds squeaked up and Annel looked out at him. She smiled, and pulling up the blind over the door, asked him to come in.

Long clambered in. The Valupian State Railway did not boast the vaguest platform.

"Why all the darkness?"

She looked at him and he saw she was excited; her eyes sparkled and she clasped and unclasped her ringed hands.

"I can open the windows and get a leetle air without the dust, the blinds keep it out."

Long wondered why he had never thought of this simple scheme before. He threw his haversack into a corner and sat down. Annel, he noticed, was travelling alone, an unusual event in Valupez for a girl of her age and station.

"Going far?"

She shrugged her delicate shoulders. "Where can one go but Palago or Balamina?"

This was quite true, but did not give him any information.

"Mind if I smoke?"

"If you please," she answered politely.

John took out an old tin and cut up some leaves with his knife. He had got used to and rather liked smoking his own tobacco, it grew well and the autumn sun dried the leaves very quickly to a beautiful shade of canary yellow. He let them sweat during the winter and thereafter allowed them to mature between oak boards.

The train started with a characteristic jerk which sent him flying on to the seat opposite. When he had regained his position and lit his pipe, he shouted above the din the train made when the windows were open:

"I am going to find out where your father and young Pask have gone to."

She nodded. "I thought you were."

Long retrieved his haversack and fumbling about in it produced a revolver. He looked at it critically, and then remarked, "There's something funny going on and I am finding out what it is." He chucked the revolver back into his haversack.

If he had thought he was going to frighten Annel he was wrong; she appeared completely unmoved. She remarked casually, as if it had been the politest Oxford English:

"You think I am a bitch seller?"

Long was puzzled by the remark. 'Seller'? How did that come in with 'Bitch'? There seemed no connection. He scratched his unshaven chin.

"I don't know what seller means, but I have said you were the other thing behind your back, so I might as well own up to it before your face."

"You and those Ameranos talk a lot about me behind my back."

Long felt uncomfortable. He did not answer.

"You must know in zis country everyone tells everything everybody else say."

"That's right," Long John agreed. He felt foolish, rather a cad, a small boy before the Head.

"When you call me kinkio and bitch and say these stories concerning me, do you tell them also that you do the great Englaise honour of propose marriage to me?"

Long looked at the floor. He felt rotten. It was true. He

had thought—— Never mind, he was crazy to love a woman like this.

He remarked weakly, looking at the dusty carpet, "It was a long time ago."

Annel smiled, but there was no laughter in her smile. "Not so long. I make sixteen years at the time you ask me for my hand—it is not five years. Can you change so much from loving?"

He was going to frame some form of answeı, but she went on.

"Does thees Andy tell you why he wait so long in Tieste? Is it to make sales of locomotives? What about this great Sturn? Has he told you how he want to marry a kinkio also?" She stopped him again from answering. "You have told Dennis all these things about me—evare since you acquaint with him on ze boat."

She waited this time for a reply. Long looked at the floor, he felt somehow very small indeed.

"Yes?" she asked, still waiting.

Long looked at her apologetically. "You're right, I am a cad. I did try and sort of . . ."

"Sort of!" She sneered with a curl of her passionate mouth. "You say I make a fool of this Legation boy, yes, and Peadro and Sylve, so they fight over me, yes. That I am a no good." She laughed again harshly. "Oh, I have been waiting years to haf a talk, a leetle talk with you, Mestare Long."

"Everybody says these things," Long answered weakly.

"And are they true?"

"You can't get away from facts. The boy jumped overboard and Peadro is dead."

"Leesten, Mestare Long. When you come to my father's house every day to see me, do I ask you? Do I say, come again?"

"That's five years ago."

"Nevare mind how many year, do I ask you?" she cried.

"No," Long admitted sheepishly.

"Do I, a girl of sixteen, propose to you? Answer."

"Well, no."

"Who do, then?"

"Well, I suppose I do."

"And I do not encourage you?"

"No."

"Do I tell you I will never marry you?"

Long nodded.

"And do you ask me again and again, so many times?"

He nodded again, miserably.

"And I nevare encourage you?"

"No."

"Now, if you go and jump into the sea or fight duel, who is to blame?"

Long scratched his head. "I suppose I would be."

Annel sank back against the hard cushions.

Long held out his hand. "I am sorry, Annel, I have been a cad. I apologise. I'll never say anything against you again."

She shrugged, indicating in one indescribable gesture that it didn't matter what Long said about her now, it was too late.

She leant forward. "If you had not told Dennis all these things he would haf believed me and not gone away with my father. I only find out to-day they go. He is clevare, my father. They go on Monday, they go to the old mine beyond Odrimendo. My father is a dangerous man, he has power, can do what he like here. The cliffs are high up there in the Ruberio." She paused, and then accusingly, "It was you who tell him bluff my father?"

"I thought it would work," Long answered sadly.

"It has worked too well."

"There is one ray, that we reach them first."

"He is very clevare, my father. He will persuade. Already he has men sent to make salt in the old mine." She laughed. "He has, what you say, ore specimens? Yes, he has those always ready."

"But why should he?" Long asked, puzzled. "There is plenty in the new workings of genuine stuff."

She smiled. "You will nevare understand us. It is his nature to do things different."

"You don't seem to like him much," Long shouted above the din.

Annel made a small suggestive grimace as if she had encountered a nasty smell.

They sweated and steamed through the afternoon. The minutes crawled by interminably. In the dusk the train stopped with a sigh at Palago.

They found the tall American standing in the dark station. He had a Packard waiting, and they raced off at once through the night. Long explained all that was necessary during the long hours.

He said once to Sturn, "I am sorry, dragging you into all this. It's nothing to do with you."

Sturn, driving, did not take his eyes off the road which the big car was gobbling up, the white beams illuminating it for miles.

"Can't you realise, John, that us English-speaking, reasonably-minded people must stick together. That we're the same race, the same people, only separated because your Government never will try and see people's viewpoints in other lands."

Farther on they ran over a large kinkio, which darted out from the side of the road, its eyes bright as Sirius.

"I hate running them over," Sturn apologised.

Suddenly from the gloom beside him Annel spoke. "You have killed me. Kinkio is dead." She laughed gaily.

Long remarked to Sturn, "That reminds me, old man, I think I'm big enough to tell you I have got Annel all wrong, and I want to apologise before her for running her down." He hesitated and then laughed. "It's all the rottener of me because I proposed to her myself and she turned me down."

Sturn drove on, tearing up the night, through the lonely plantations where crickets chirped and frogs made their din above the purr of the car.

Sturn asked abruptly, "Do you accept my apology, also, Annel?"

"Mestare Sturn, you are too big a man to apologise."

He did not answer as he was not sure whether it was a joke about his height or whether she meant it as a compliment.

They pulled up at Sturn's bungalow as the sun started to race up, an orange demon chasing up into the sky from the black

palms, as if it were afraid the dusty plain of Kelbi might be getting cold, anxious to scorch the red dust once more.

After a general wash up, Sturn met them in his cool living-room where a light snack of fruit and coffee was spread on a green rush table.

"It's only a mule road to Starinda and it takes a whole day. But I have one of our tractors and a truck alongside, and if you want to get moving we ought to start. But you must be tired?" He looked at Annel.

"Mestare Sturn, you have been very kind. Someday I will find a way of doing you a kindness. I am ready to start now."

"You have had no sleep."

She shook her head. "I do not wish any."

Long blurted out, "Does Dennis Pask mean so much to you as all that?"

Sturn walked to the window and looked out at the red patch of carefully weeded gravel. He was sorry Long had asked the question. His more intuitive brain knew she loved the boy, had given him the love they had both sought, thrown it away on this shallow youth.

She spoke slowly, picking at her half-finished grape-fruit, "He is the only one that ever matter."

Sturn looked at her speculatively. She had changed into jodhpurs and boots. It seemed impossible that this exotic creature should have fallen for the stupid English boy, but he made no comment.

He had arranged cushions and rugs at the bottom of the truck, the great yellow caterpillar tractor was steady as a rock, so that they managed to sleep during the long hours to Starinda, where they learnt, in the dark heat of the native village, that the party had spent the previous night there, leaving early in the morning.

"We must go on," Annel told them, "there is still time."

But Caesare's party had taken all the available mules.

They went during the night, crashing over a rough track to a small estancia, but the natives had gone out on a visit to a mountain village many miles away, taking their mules with them.

It was three in the morning when they got back to Starinda, but Annel would not let them sleep.

"We must try by tractor."

"It's no go," Sturn told her. "It's forest country—great mahoganies, teak and cotton trees as wide as that hut. We can't get through."

"Do something. There must be something you can do."

"I'll walk in the daylight, but it's pitch now, and I don't know the way."

They stood, a forlorn group in the glaring headlights of the tractor.

"It's no go, Annel. If you don't fancy the huts we'll tuck you up in the truck for the night. There are few skeeters up here, you won't need a net."

"Can't you do something?" She put her hand pathetically on his coat sleeve.

The men looked at each other helplessly. They knew she was exhausted and it was hopeless to try and move till morning.

"Do something!" she shouted at them, stamping her foot. "Don't stand like seller-bitches. Get on! We must get on!"

She turned to the black village guide who leant half-asleep against the wing of the tractor and spoke volubly to him in Valupian. He seemed frightened, rolling his eyes. Sturn did not know what she said, but he could see the guide did not want to do it. Annel stormed at the cowering boy, but he shook his head. Long had gathered what it was she asked him.

"You're crazy," he told her. "Besides, the boy says he doesn't know the way. Wait till morning. It will only waste time if we go now. There will probably be mules in the morning."

Without another word she turned from them and walked back to the truck. The man sighed with relief, but she didn't sleep, she sat inside, her hands clasped round her knees, looking in the direction dawn would come.

She didn't cry or make a sound of any sort. She just sat there through the hours, gazing into the black pall of jungle night, where occasional fireflies flickered through the trees.

In the half-hour before dawn the frogs stopped whistling and a great stillness settled over the fevered land. A pregnant stifling quiet that was unbearable, loathsome. Annel clasped her jodhpurred legs tighter and crunched her strange, alluring body against her knees. She murmured to herself over and over again, staring out into the black waste of vegetation, rocking gently backwards and forwards, murmuring continuously, "Oliani, pecanni, moleldo." Staring out there at the treacherous jungle, her eyes seemed to pierce the gloom, to see through it, beyond. Her whole will-power was concentrated, riveted on some purpose. She murmured on as the pale searchlights of rose dawn pierced the mists of the forest, "Oliani, pecanni, moleldo," which cannot be translated, for the words are not Valupian, they are age-old, a Voodoo spell that traces back through blood and horrors unthinkable to a past that no man knows.

10

TUESDAY, AUGUST 22ND

CAESARE had not meant to shoot Dennis. To do him justice he was, as his adopted daughter constantly remarked, 'clevare', and bullet holes in a man's skull take explaining away even in Valupez. His intention was to climb up behind Dennis, frighten him by pouncing suddenly, and taking advantage of his surprise, topple him over the cliff where he would of a certainty break his neck in the most natural manner. However, Dennis turned on him while he was still climbing up the steep shore of the salt lake. He stood up, realised further stalking was futile, and advanced on Dennis in what policemen describe as a 'menacing manner'.

Caesare was too fine a gentleman to think of engaging in rough-and-tumble fighting, so when only a few paces separated them he fired quickly. The bullet missed and whined away into the nothingness over the canyon. Dennis stood up, putting his hand in his pocket. Caesare fired two more shots rapidly—the first 'zunked' into the soft salt. Dennis half-turned, drawing Annel's revolver, but the second shot tore across his back making him contract with pain, lose his foot-

ing and fall bounding down the steep slope they had just ascended. Unconsciously he put his left hand over his face as a buffer, but a sharp rock broke the arm and it fell away useless. Another boulder struck him on the forehead and knocked him out, so during the last hundred feet he bounded loosely, unconsciously, like a shot rabbit. A big boulder on the salt lake bed brought him up sharply. He lay motionless, the blood oozing from the wound.

Caesare Del Monte sat down and reviewed the position. His first pleasure as a marksman (he imagined that he had killed Dennis right out) gave way to annoyance because his task now became harder, and Del Monte loathed physical labour. He would have to carry the Englishman up to the top of the bank and pound his body with stones so that the bullet wound was not noticeable before rolling him over the cliff.

Dennis, returning to consciousness, remembered at once what had happened. His sporting instincts were aroused, and ignoring the agonising pain from his arm and back, lifted the little mother-of-pearl revolver and blew out the salt which had entered the barrel during his fall.

Del Monte sat considering his problem a hundred and fifty feet above Dennis. His clothes looked black against the light and Dennis felt, as he pressed the trigger, that it was like some weird form of rook shooting. He heard the bullet thud into Caesare and saw the fat man leap in the air. His second bullet was also a direct hit and made Caesare sit down quickly.

'It's all very well,' Dennis thought, 'but these tiny bullets of mine won't do much damage. He is shooting at me with a service revolver. It must be 6/4 on.'

Caesare fired again and the bullet ricocheted off the rock a few feet above him, howling away across the salt lake. Dennis steadied his aim and plunked another tiny bullet into the Valupian. Caesare gave off a long, high yell of surprise and pain. Dennis noticed he had moved, taken cover; he was lying behind a rock resting his revolver on it to steady his aim. He decided also to take cover and crawled painfully round the boulder. When he was half-way round, Caesare

fired, this time scoring a hit, smashing Dennis's right heel and tearing out through the flesh of the leg.

He managed to roll behind the rock and lay there in the cool shadow. His back hurt most, an unbearable throbbing pain which made him swirl off into red oblivion, his brain tortured to numbness. After a little he became conscious and the old sporting spirit returning, he counted his rounds. He had only two left.

'If I had only known we were going to have this show,' he thought, 'I have a box of a hundred .22 on my mantelpiece at home and plenty of service rounds, too. We could have had a great day potting at each other.'

He peered round the rock and saw Caesare had come out of cover, was tearing up his pale pink striped shirt for bandages.

'I must sting him up a bit more.' He took out one of his remaining cartridges and notched the end. 'This will kick his kidneys. They're probably floating already—it will sink them.' He cackled through his parched throat, highly pleased at the notion.

Sneaking round the corner of his protective boulder he aimed, then lowered his revolver.

'I can't shoot him while he's bandaging himself.'

"Hi, Hi," Dennis shouted.

Caesare looked up.

"I am going to have a pot at you. Take cover!"

Caesare shook his fist in reply, but did not move.

"All right, then," Dennis said, "I warned you," and zonked the dum-dum into Del Monte.

Caesare shrieked, doubling up. Dennis cackled. There was something satisfactory about a target that shrieked every time you hit it. Great soft oaf! A human sponge!

In the excitement of the battle he determined to bang off his last bullet.

'I won't dum-dum it—rather a shame. I'll try and smash the gold teeth, a tricky shot.'

But a sudden spasm of pain just as he fired put him off and the bullet merely grazed Caesare's shoulder.

'Well, that's that,' Dennis thought, 'I am through. My goodness! I believe he is, too, unless he's got some loose ones

in his pocket.' But he was sure Caesare had finished. 'His ammunition must have been running low or he'd have potted at me more when I was in front of the rock.'

His shattered heel began to hurt, a searing, vivid pain that made him writhe amongst the lumps of rock salt. He felt about in his pocket for a knife to cut his boot away, but when he found the knife and with great agony raised himself, he found he couldn't stoop.

"I must be seizing up a bit," he said aloud through his locked teeth. "Let me think. He fired twice at me on the edge of the cliff and once when I was going down. That's three, then, he missed. No, he fired three shots on the top—that would be four. Then the one that got my leg—yes, and another one that hit the rock and ricocheted—that's six. He's empty." Then a doubt came to Dennis. "Did he fire at me going down the face?"

He couldn't remember. His brain whirled, his head seemed rising, going away from his body. Through the red mist he heard Caesare shout a croaky, hoarse shout. On his good right arm he pivoted himself round so that he could look up the slope, his body shielded by the rock. Del Monte was waving a white handkerchief.

'He has finished then,' Dennis thought, and waved back. Caesare started to crawl down the steep towards him.

'I must have got him pretty bad.'

Dennis passed out suddenly like electric light being switched off. When he came back from the peaceful black oblivion Caesare had reached within a dozen paces of his sheltering rock. Dennis felt it was like a target on a miniature range being hauled up for inspection. He saw with pride that he had hit him in the chest, probably the dum-dum, as it seemed a large hole welling blood through the loosely-tied bandage.

"Hullo!" Dennis called. "Is it an armistice?"

Caesare lay for some time on the salt, then raising his head he cried in a hoarse voice, "I have finished my shells." He crawled on to the shadow of the rock and lay there beside Dennis. "I can go no farther."

The words of an old carol swam up before Dennis. "Bring me flesh and bring me wine." Somehow he couldn't remem-

ber how it went or how "I can go no farther" came in, or even what it was called. Caesare was asking him something.

Yes, he had finished his ammunition, too. He heard Del Monte say, "You haf only shot five." He told him that was all he had, but knew he wasn't believed.

"Over the ridge there is water," Caesare told him.

The salt lake began to burn before his eyes with the risen sun, great waves of blazing heat came to them.

"How far?"

"Quite close."

"It will be salt."

"No, fresh."

Dennis made a big effort. "Give me your hat and I'll try and get you some."

Del Monte pased his sombrero over. "I am sorry I try and shoot you."

"Oh, don't worry."

Dennis started to worm his way up the slope. Every movement was torture. When he had his back turned and had gone two yards, Caesare fired his last cartridge. The bullet shattered Dennis's right arm at the shoulder, the nearness of the shot pounding it up in a broken mince mixed up with the salt and bits of bone sticking out. He lay on his face, a great stream of thick blood welling out. The black curtain enveloped him, rich, soothing oblivion. When he came back to consciousness he tried to turn over but was too weak.

"You still there?" he grated weakly.

Caesare's voice choked back, "I am very sick."

Dennis smiled, his face buried in the blood-drenched salt. "What about me? You should be more careful, you might have killed me."

His mouth was filled with salt and blood and his ears sang so he didn't know whether his voice was making any sound or not.

"You are a lousy shot."

The velvet blackness descended again. His body, when he woke, seemed detached from him; he only had a head and a brain.

"You still there?"

"Yes," a weak voice answered.

"Turn me over like a good chap."

"I am too sick," the voice replied, and Caesare groaned horribly.

A desire to be on his back came to Dennis. He started rocking himself and fell over on the incline behind the boulder. The light was so bright. After a long lie on his face he couldn't see anything, but he felt quite comfortable as if he was floating. He found that he had rolled into the shadow behind the rock.

Caesare was sitting, his legs in front of him. He wilted, doubled up over his stomach. The sun beat down on his greasy neck.

"Don't groan so. You can't be so badly hit as me."

Caesare continued to groan and gurgle.

"I believe you will die before I do. I am sorry," he told Caesare, "I potted you, but it was fun."

Caesare groaned faintly.

"Sorry I can't do anything for you. Can't move. Dying, you know."

Caesare gurgled, as if breathing under water.

"Don't bear you any ill-will. I'm so dumb—fair do for anybody. Always been dumb. Everyone scores bulls off me."

Dennis tried to laugh, but passed out again.

It was evening when he next opened his eyes, the sun was sinking and the ridges of the dry lake were haloed with gold light. Caesare was in the same position and Dennis noticed several vultures sitting twenty yards off, looking at them.

"You dead?" he asked.

He felt refreshed, had no feelings at all now, could even think.

Caesare didn't answer. He couldn't have heard if he had been alive as no sound came from Dennis's mouth, but he had been dead for several hours.

'I believe you *are* dead,' Dennis thought.

He said, "I've beaten you to it. I wouldn't have missed that scrap for anything—makes up for the basking shark.

I wonder if Orina knows I forgave her. Never thought I should die like this. It's been fun—life—really. I've had a good time, just wish I could have got a girl to love me. Silly thing to wish. Always wanted that. Orina should have loved me, or somebody—what was her name?—or this girl." He couldn't think collectively.

In the morning he was still alive. The night was a blank. He had opened his eyes once, but his brain hadn't registered, and he had gone off again. As he became conscious now everything was clear.

"He smells worse when he's dead."

There were the ring of vultures, more now. He knew they wouldn't touch him, somebody was keeping them off. He couldn't remember who. Orina? No, it was somebody else.

A great agony came over him, his brain becoming sufficiently conscious to realise pain. His body started to shake, move. It was as if he was lying in a pit of broken glass, red-hot glass tearing his flesh to ribands. He half rose and fell over on his face, dug his head in the salt. Somebody seemed there, telling him not to die.

"I love you," a voice said, "you must not die."

He dug with his head in the loose salt, the broken glass was tearing him everywhere.

"I am chucking it."

But this girl wouldn't let him chuck it.

"I can't go on Annel"—that's who it was, Annel!—"I can't go on. I am finished. I've messed everything. I had all the chances and messed them. Let me go, you can't stop me. Hell can't be worse than life."

He felt her holding him with both hands, she wouldn't let him go.

"I have made the most awful bloody mess of everything. It's all over."

He tore himself away into that cool blackness. He was floating in the blackness. He could just see Annel's lovely face fading behind him. She was crying. He had found somebody to mourn him, after all.

As the sun rose the vultures walked closer, they tore at Caesare, fighting over him, trotting away with choice morsels.

But they would not go near Dennis. It was as if an electric fence separated them from him. He lay arched, his head stuck in the salt pan, while innumerable flies blackened the wound on his back and the arc whiteness of the sun beat down on him, but the vultures would not touch him.

All alone the bodies lay in the great salt lake. The vultures fighting over one body, but the other was untouched—the boy who had said as he died, "I have messed everything."

When Long, Sturn and Annel found them, Caesare was reduced to practically nothing. Annel turned Dennis over and pillowed his loose head on her lap. His face looked peaceful; it had remained preserved, away from the sun. She sat for some time looking at the face all scarred and blotched, and no one went near her.

They had spades on the mules and they buried the two bodies side by side. Annel did not speak. Long and Sturn took her away from the place. The Devil's Salt Cellar, the mule boys called it.

She seemed worried over something.

"I kept him alive as long as I could," she told Sturn.

He thought she was wandering and did not answer.

"But he wanted to go—he wanted to go. He couldn't see the beauty under the surface. All his life he looked for it and couldn't find it, and at the end it was there, in his hands."

Still Sturn said nothing.

She turned to Long and asked, "Is it possible for hair to grow on a dead face?"

CYCLE FIVE

FADE TO BLACK-OUT

1

LATE AUGUST, 1939

CONSTANCE PASK walked round her big drawing-room covered with dust sheets. She had just returned to her London house from Stephen's Scottish shooting lodge.

The largest capital in the world sweltered in a late August heat wave, a disorganised holiday atmosphere pervaded the unplanned, haphazardly erected forest of houses. The illogical crooked streets reeked with sour petrol fumes, stale cabbages from greengrocers were mixed with the fresh smell of bitumen from road-patching operations, while tired groups of provincial humanity surveyed the smoke-begrimed collection of buildings which formed the traditional sights of the ill-constructed city—Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, the Great Tower.

But it was Home to Constance, who had spent a lifetime Mayfairing. Clouds of destruction hung over Europe. She felt it would be silly to go abroad and yet her friends were still away. London gave her the creeps. The underlying tension that blew in wisps everywhere combined with the usual August holiday unhingeing. She felt for the first time in her life without purpose.

She sat down in a dust-sheeted chair and looked fixedly at the marble mantelpiece.

Mrs. Holman came in sheepishly and stood in front of Mrs. Pask. Constance surveyed her, noting the blue serge dress and the folded paper she held in her hand.

"Yes, Mrs. Holman?"

Mrs. Holman creased the paper nervously.

"It's very hot, madam," she said politely.

"Very. Any further European news?"

"No, madam."

"It's lucky Mr. Dennis is away out of it all. I hear they are calling up reservists."

"Yes, madam." Mrs. Holman creased the paper again. "Holman is attached to transport," she volunteered.

"Sir Charles Porch," Mrs. Pask said comfortably, "thinks it is only a nine days' wonder."

"I hope so, I am sure."

The conversation came to an end. There seemed nothing more to say.

"You wanted——?" Mrs. Pask asked.

"I was cleaning one of Holman's old liveries and I found a note inside. He must have had it about the time—about—when he had the accident with the car. He must have forgotten to give it you."

Constance held out her hand for the paper, but Mrs. Holman still creased it.

"I am very sorry he forgot to give it you at the time."

"Oh, it doesn't really matter. I don't expect it's of any consequence now. It must be three months old."

"Yes, madam. The Duchess of Wayford's driver brought it round and gave it to Holman. He can't think how he could have forgotten to give it you."

Constance smiled. She remembered the luncheon party and wondered if this was the missing invitation she had worried over so much. She held out her hand again, but Mrs. Holman still creased and uncreased the slip of paper and did not pass it over. Constance looked closer at the folded sheet. It looked cheap paper torn off a pad.

"You should not have opened it," she said sharply.

"It was open. Just a note asking you to a luncheon party."

So it was the invitation! She had been asked after all. Ella had played fair with her.

Still Mrs. Holman held the paper.

"I am sorry, madam. Naturally I did not think it was of any importance—just an old piece of paper. I glanced at it to see what it was about."

Mrs. Pask knew that it must have been in an envelope. Probably they had kept it back out of spite and now for some reason had thought better of it. It didn't matter. She

felt disjointed, unable to cope with a long cross-examination about an incident that was dead and buried. She wondered if it was a personal friendly note. Now she came to think of it, she hadn't seen Ella for months, had avoided her, all her friends.

"Give it me."

"I am sorry, madam, I haven't got it with me. This is a telephone message. I took it off the telephone."

"Oh!"

A vague uneasiness came over Constance. This woman was trying to break something to her gently.

"Bad news?" she asked, sitting up in the chair.

"Yes, madam, I am afraid so. Mr. Whyte rang up from Scotland. He spoke to me. He wished me to tell you that Mr. Dennis has met with an accident. They are afraid it is rather serious, and he will ring you up again to-night when he hears more."

Constance looked at the woman fixedly. Stephen's tact did not hoodwink her. She spoke quietly, almost coldly.

"He's dead," she said. "Dennis is dead."

Mrs. Holman looked at the floor.

"Yes, madam," she murmured.

Constance leant back.

"Leave me," she commanded.

"If there is anything any of us can do——?"

"No, thank you. Please go away."

Constance sat in the chair gazing at the marble mantelpiece. She did not cry. It was not her nature to cry or become emotional; years of training had drilled out her few natural emotions. A pathetic figure sitting there in the large drawing-room, she found to her surprise that she felt no emotion at all. It was a full stop, the end of a scene in her life, that was all. When her husband had been killed in 1917 she had felt the same.

She remembered leaving the Alhambra after a charity matinée—yes, she had been on the Committee—and driving home in a tame taxi she had hired for her use during the war years. They didn't 'phone wires in those days. She had picked the orange envelope off the console table by the front door. Somehow she had never felt bound up in her husband. Her life had gone on just the same.

And now it was Dennis! She tried to think back, recapture some poignant sweet memory of her son. She recalled scraps, but they were not poignant nor particularly sweet. Dennis trying to make her take him to Ascot from Eton, an endless argument in his room with caps and canes hung over pictures and notices bordered by his house colour riband. What a bore it had been! She remembered wishing that she hadn't gone down to see him. Suddenly she laughed. It hadn't mattered, the races had been spoilt by a thunderstorm, ruining dresses and killing a man.

She recalled Dennis on the Isles of Foam, helping her ashore and telling her that the shoes she was wearing were not suitable. She remembered him as a baby, fat, podgy, howling, and being sick on her infrequent visits to the nursery. All the memories she summoned were tawdry, tarnished scenes. She tried to get something better but couldn't.

'There is something wrong with me,' she thought. 'Why can't I be emotional like other women—cry, howl, make a scene.'

But she just sat on in the chair, the dust-cover rucked up round her like a winding-sheet, a dead woman whose life had come to an end, who had strived after nothing and got nothing, put nothing into life and received nothing. She sat on, knowing that her life had come to an end, that nothing could hurt her, that no interest could amuse her because she had sold all the essence of life, all the sympathy and joy and love and she was left empty, without goal or object.

When Stephen rang up she answered unaffectedly; knowing that he would tell by her voice what sort of woman she was, that her son's death meant nothing to her, that all the careful sympathy he was ladling out fell on her ears emptily. But Stephen went on talking, he didn't seem able to ring off. He sidetracked on the European situation. What were people saying in London? What did Porch say?

She told him in the same dry, unemotional voice that Porch said we must protect the sacredness of weak nations, that Britain stood as a tower of strength for the poor and the suffering, his very words coming back to her. He said also that we would not fight in the end, the Poles could not hold out against superior odds, we would be unable to assist them in

time, at the fifty-ninth minute of the eleventh hour they would give over Danzig, a lull would be granted so that the peoples of the world could sit back and say to each other, 'What next?'

Still Stephen hung on.

She asked at length, "What is it? What more do you want to know?"

He wanted to know, it seemed, why Dennis had thrown Orina over, whether it was because of chivalry, because he thought that she wished to be released but would not break her word of honour, or whether it was that he was tired of her, in love with somebody else.

Constance didn't know, he hadn't confided in her, just said that the engagement was off. She hadn't really thought why young people were always breaking off engagements. She sighed. Perhaps they had a fight. How could she know? Anyway, it was all over now. Did it really matter?

Stephen asked again if there was anything he could do and Constance told him nothing.

She had dinner in bed, but after dinner felt uncomfortable, sticky, nervous. She rang for her maid, and put on some day clothes and went out by herself, walking quickly down the street without plan or caring where she went. People passing dropped sentences here and there: "Hitler . . ." "The Poles are great fighters." They all seemed to be engrossed in the European crisis. She, personally, hadn't followed the recent political moves, the newspapers bored her and she hardly ever read one, but she had learnt quickly enough the details—friends loved finding someone who didn't know so they could pour buckets of gossip over them. For days, now she came to think of it, people had told her in complete confidence of secret rays which made the country impregnable from the air. "Don't tell a soul," they had added, "nobody knows." She had long grown accustomed to water-filled trenches in the parks. Perhaps it really did mean something. Was it possible the nation who had thrown their youth away in 1914 could do the same thing again? Was there any cause, however sacred, which justified such a step?

She stopped beneath the planes round the Artillery statue. If one turned one's back on the poster-covered exterior of

St. George's it was wonderful, the finest view in London, with Piccadilly a flowing river of lights on the one side, and the dark grandeur of Constitution Hill. The lights twinkled through the trees and the scene was coloured with pastel shades of lilac and orange, merging to the deep purple of the sky. A picture to reflect on with the lead foreground figure to give it that cynical twist that a great picture must have—the dead soldier with his fleshless toes sticking through the worn boots.

Suddenly she thought vividly of a salt lake, a dried salt lake. 'No one will ever know who shot first,' Stephen's words. 'This planter says he must have put up a wonderful show.' Her only child lying dead in a salt lake, fighting with an unknown Valupian . . .

She saw the nurse with a mackintosh apron putting powder on him after his bath. What care and trouble! Summer visits to the seaside, all his expensive education, so that he could lie dead in the broiling sun in a salt lake. All that terrible fuss for nothing! Like her own life. All the immense agonising trouble she had taken over social things, her figure, hair, complexion, and in the end it hadn't mattered, it hadn't got her anywhere. .

She looked again at the memorial, at the dead soldier—a skeleton below the heavy equipment. These men had felt their rotting bodies in the Flanders mud would form a staircase to a better world. 'Men,' she thought, 'are idealists. Restlessly, discontentedly searching for something they can never get. Women are the realists. They know the pain and beauty of creation, they don't want to see the tanks pressing down the grey faces of their children into the mud. They see the real purpose of life and they have to pay—pay all the time.'

2

ABOUT THE SAME TIME

"HE's there!"

Orina's reel screamed and her rod bent.

"Don't wind, let him run!"

The taut line from the circled rod cut the brown water, a white feather of spray racing behind it.

"Let him run again. It's deep here."

The fish rushed down. Dave pulled gently at the oars.

"Dinna let him get under the boat or he's away. Steady now, give him a bit more of the butt."

"He's enormous. Is it a salmon?"

"Likely. He's coming up now."

Girr-rer! The fish tore along the surface and jumped, a silvery red torpedo.

"Aye, it's a fish!" Dave said, and excitement rang in his voice. It wasn't often they got salmon in Loch Moss.

The fish swam steadily round the boat.

"He's jerking his head," Orina said nervously. "How big do you think he is?"

"About fifteen pounds. Dinna reel in, you're too jerky. I'll bring the boat nearer."

Ten minutes later Dave had taken the cork from the point of the little-used gaff and waited expectantly, the boat beached on the steep shore. Orina, her nerves tingling, saw the bluish back circling slowly a few feet away.

"Try and raise him a little," Dave whispered, stretching the gaff forward.

Orina raised her bent rod higher and the blue circling fish came up to the surface, his dorsal fin fanning out of the water.

"Canny," Dave cautioned, "canny now, he's lightly hooked. Try and guide him in a bit."

But the fish with a sudden spurt raced away, the reel screamed, Orina lowered the point of her rod and the salmon splashed along the surface as a speedboat, then settled down in the brown rippling deep.

"You can bring him back again now."

Orina reeled in slowly then furiously.

"Oh, Dave, he's gone!" The fly trailed up on the surface. "Oh, Dave, what did I do?"

Dave placed the cork back on the gaff.

"You shouldn't have lowered your rod. There was no play between you and the fish," he said crossly.

They walked back in silence across the rough track that led from the loch to Dave's cottage and Orina's small car Dave did not speak. It was some years since anyone had caught a salmon in Loch Moss and he was disappointed.

As they started down the slope by the three sentinel birch trees Orina apologised.

"I am sorry I was stupid."

Dave looked at her. "I am sorry, madam, if I have been rude or disrespectful, but you should have kept your rod up."

"He may take again?" Orina asked hopefully.

"Not he. Did you not see how red he was? He'll lie about in the deep at the burn mouth biding his time for the spate."

At the birches Orina stopped. She looked at Dave.

"Do you never lose fish?"

"Aye, whiles," Dave said and smiled. "Onybody does. I was rating you because I'd like fine to have seen you get your first salmon. I will sometime. It will be something to live for."

"Dave," Orina threw out a sop, "Mr. Whyte thinks Isles of Foam will be all right to run at the October Newmarket meeting. She should be a good price, people will have forgotten her. She's only run once."

"There may be no racing by that time," Dave remarked gloomily.

Orina knew that if this information did not cheer him nothing would, so she left.

As she bumped the car on to the rough road she looked back and saw Dave standing by his whitewashed house, his eyes following her. The three birches, yellowing with the autumn, stood out large in the wet air. There was something symbolic about them with their ghostly stems and drooping branches, their grace and virility to stand erect on the wind-swept slope like the Scottish character, like Dave himself. She waved but Dave merely removed his cap respectfully.

After tea Stephen drew her aside into the chilly drawing-room of the lodge. They left the other guests in the pitch-pine living-room; as they stood silent by the window heard the murmur of their voices forever discussing war and rumours of war.

Orina waited for Stephen to speak, gazing through the window at the olive grass with crystal globules hanging from the feathery flowers, the rough field with its uncomfortable

rhododendron bush, the iron dripping fence, then the stretch of heather hill.

"You wanted to tell me something?"

Stephen put an arm round her waist, lifting the short tweed coat and holding her firmly by the waistband of her skirt.

"It's poor old Dennis. I had a cable."

She straightened herself, bracing her body.

"He got into some sort of scrape out there. He's——" Stephen altered the sentence. "He got hurt."

Orina did not answer. She was thinking of Dennis in the hut on the island when suddenly he had shown her his real self.

Stephen went on, "It's all my fault. I was the only person who looked after him, I should not have let him go. Constance never took any interest in him. I should have done more for him."

Orina knew that Dennis was dead, knew by the tone of Stephen's voice, but she hoped against that inner knowledge that it was not true, that she would see him again, speak to him. 'I could talk him round,' she thought, 'make him love me once more. If I could only have Dennis back I wouldn't be so critical, analytical, take the pureness he offered even though it was stupid and small.'

She turned towards Stephen, breaking away from his grasp.

"It's not hopeless? He may recover?"

"No, I am afraid . . ."

She stopped him. "No, no, you must not say that. He will come back again, he must, he is a reservist, he will want to fight. He would be great in a war, just the officer the country wants. He will come back. He can't be killed in a brawl somewhere, a place nobody has ever heard of. You must do something—have him flown to a proper hospital. Don't you see I can't have it? We parted fighting, he must come back and forgive me."

She spoke now through blinding tears, talking helplessly, at random.

"Stephen, don't stand there! I must have him back. He wants somebody who understands him. He hasn't got anybody. Can't you understand? I stole the best out of him, cheated him. I have got to give it back. You don't want

your wife to be a cheat, do you? He hasn't got a soul in the world who really knows anything about him."

She stopped, standing there, her small shoulders heaving, while tears traced down her face. Stephen had never seen Orina break down before. At length he told her.

"Dennis can never come back. He's dead."

"Dead? How can he be? You don't know, you're guessing. You haven't told Constance he is dead?"

Stephen nodded. "I told her. I know the details. I had a letter from a planter by Air Mail. I should have told you before but you seemed strange lately, unhappy. I didn't want to worry you with all this fuss on in the papers, I thought it could wait."

He tried to take her in his arms, but she broke away, looking at him wildly, accusingly.

"You liar! You weren't going to tell me. You were keeping it to yourself. You don't care what happens, who dies. You haven't any feelings. You just buy things and play with them for a few days and then go back to your own life, arguing endlessly with your old bores." She laughed fiercely. "Why did you send Dennis out to that blasted hole of a country to have him killed?"

"But——" Stephen interjected, thought again and said nothing.

Orina dried her eyes with determination.

"Will you order the car? I will catch the night train."

"But where are you going? What good can you do?"

She looked at him. "I can't stay here another minute. I am going home."

"But, Orina, how have you altered so? Can't you remember the fun we had at Le Bock when you were so gay and we swam in the morning and the nights? Darling, you can't have changed—altered in a few weeks!"

Orina laughed. "It isn't true. All that—it's a dream. I was acting, putting it on, paying for my keep.. Will you order the car? I will tell my maid to pack."

Stephen watched her, saying nothing. His mind ran deep, subtly, so no one could follow it. He made no further effort to restrain her, but, smiling faintly, said, "Of course, dear, I

will have the shooting van sent round. It will hold all your luggage."

She walked to the door and he opened it for her, gravely polite. She stopped on the threshold.

"Stephen!" She spoke faintly, irresolutely.

"Yes, dear?" He waited, knowing it was in her mind to change, come back to him, into his arms. "Yes, dear?"

But the 'Yes, dear?' struck a discord, and she switched round, asking him to forward her letters, marching off through the wondering guests.

Stephen said good-bye to her in the same faintly ironical manner at the door and she let him kiss her on the cheek so that the servants would not see anything was wrong. He looked at her, smiling faintly.

"You will find some grouse in the back, will you give them to your father? I'm sorry I can't send him a salmon."

3

AT FLERS

"RINA, why have you come back in the middle of the shooting season? Is it the trouble in Europe?" her sister asked.

Orina looked at her curiously. "Marriage," she told her, "is an intensive business. I get well paid and fed, but I must have a rest, holidays like other workers."

The dark girl made no answer but looked at Orina's dresses laid out on the bed.

"Mr. Rawlings doesn't like your maid. Mum says it's rather silly to bring a maid. Prudence looked after you before, she's hurt. Yvonne has a frightful accent, don't you think?"

Orina smiled at the amazing rapidity her sister had picked up the gossip.

"How do you know what accent she has, you can't speak French."

Brounhild blushed, a delicate rose heightening the cream of her face.

"You can't get a bath, Rina, least not a hot one. Father only has the hot water on in the morning."

"Well, I'll have a cold one." She walked off down the

passage, adding, "Come along and talk to me. I want to hear about things."

Orina plunged into the cold bath, splashing water over her face and shoulders.

"How can you, Rina! it makes me shiver to look at you."

"It's good for one. Chuck us the soap."

"You're not going to sit there in the cold and soap yourself?"

Orina laughed, looking round the walls of the nursery bathroom.

"You haven't added to our collection of transfers."

"Oh yes, do you mind, Rina, if I paint them out? I didn't like to do it without asking you, but they spoil a charming room. I wanted to paint it yellow and make brown oilskin curtains for it, but Mum said you and Malmsey would be furious if I covered your transfers."

"No, I don't mind. Art for Art's sake. Paint it puce with green daisies if you like. What's been doing?"

"Lots of people have been staying; Aunt Mary broke her leg trying to ride a mule. Betty and Baldy are coming to dinner . . ."

Orina walked along the long passage on her way to dinner. She paused automatically at the William and Mary mirror. Looking at her reflection in the yellowing glass she saw a handsome woman in powder blue with a white fox over white shoulders and a diamond star set in glinting hair. The best that the most expensive shops in London and Paris could produce. She saw also that the black sweeping lashes framed ice-blue eyes. She smiled, but through her smile the eyes remained hard, unfriendly. There is a word in the technique of film making describing the superimposing of one scene on another. Mix. Orina saw the mirror reflection mix. Another girl in her teens stood there and her eyes were soft, unspoilt, her face radiated charm. Prudence was pinning something up behind, that white gown always needed pinning. "Oh, Pru, I simply mustn't be late. Don't you think my neck's rather bare?" Pru looked. "I could go to her ladyship for her pearls." "Oh no, they're so yellow and so well

known!" Then she had laughed and made Pru laugh too. She had looked at herself in the old mirror coming back from the dance. It was dawn, she had seen the hard look in her eyes for the first time. She remembered vividly making a face at her face. 'Poor sweet,' she had thought, 'he does love me really, I know he will marry me in the end.'

Orina shook herself. Cobwebs and dust-stinking old memories. She wondered, 'If I hadn't had that help-yourself policy it might have been different, but if you're in love you can't bargain things out.' (She always made excuses for him.) 'We've both wanted the best out of life. Caroline had all my looks and was much more amusing, then I suppose this Hilary Brist is the world's No. 1 glamour girl, and I marry a millionaire of sorts . . .'

But she still felt it could have been all quite different.

Orina proceeded on down the carved oak staircase. She heard a drone of voices from the library and paused again outside the door. Whenever Orina thought of Peter it took something out of her. When she was quite collected, Mrs. Whyte opened the door. Her father greeted her absently.

"How are you, my dear?" he asked, kissing her, and then remembering, "How's that stockbroker husband of yours?"

"He's not a stockbroker and he sent you some grouse."

"He took his time about it," Sir Cerist remarked. "Betty, my dear child, of course you know Orina, and Bruce——"

Orina stopped in her greeting of Betty. Bruce—so Baldy's name was Bruce. What a name! Her father was talking earnestly with him about a claim for ploughing up the water meadow under the new fertility act.

Her mother came in dressed in a long plum velvet gown of no particular fashion or shape.

"I am terribly sorry about the water. Cerist found out that we could save a great sum of money by only using it in the morning."

"How do they wash the dishes at night?" Orina asked practically.

"I know," Lady Flers answered sadly, "that's the trouble. But we have only tried it a few days, and it's really wonder-

ful the amount of coal we save. Coal is so expensive," she added apologetically.

However badly cooked the food, however heavy the breathing of the aged butler, dinner at Flers was always a pefrect meal. The quiet of the dining-room, its situation with the summer view of the age-old garden, or in winter with the wood logs blazing up in the stone hearth, the matured oak panelling and the kindly faces looking down from the pictures. Nothing could shake the peace and fundamental comfort of the scene. A solidity which hundreds of years of Flers and green peaceful England had built up.

Baldy and Sir Cerist sat over their port, still discussing drainage grants, lime subsidies and the ultimate good of basic slag. Sir Cerist had dismissed the war cloud casually by remarking, "The world to-day lacks honour. No nation, no country, no society, can go on without implicit faith in the spoken pledge. Men will have to be taught again that honour comes before greed or power or life itself, then we may get somewhere. At the moment there is no honour in business, no honour between friends. It is worth bloodshed if it will make men understand that honesty, scrupulous honesty, matters more than life itself."

Sir Cerist fingered the wet stone of his peach, and then added carelessly, "Malmsey has joined up."

In the drawing-room Lady Flers disappeared to say good night to her youngest, who read secretly in bed unless forcibly stopped by her mother.

Betty and Orina were left alone. Betty came over and stood with Orina in front of the crackling fire.

"It's very sad, poor Dennis, but I suppose you don't mind."

"Why should you suppose that?" Orina asked coldly.

"Well, Orina, you never cared for him, did you? Always said he was stupid."

"Did I?" she answered dreamily.

"Yes, always when we were debs, do you remember how he used to follow us around—you around, I should say. You told me often he was a bore, wished he would go away. Well, he's gone now. I mean, he won't come back, will he?"

Orina shook her head. "Perhaps there wasn't much for him to come back to."

"I suppose I was the only person who ever cared for him at all."

"You?"

"Yes, me."

Orina looked at her and there was an iciness in her glance Betty had never seen there before.

"Don't tell me," she said in a hard, dead voice. "I know what you're going to say. He is the father of your child."

She paused, kicking a log straight with her thin satin shoe. Betty looked at the floor and spoke hesitatingly.

"Well, he was the man."

Orina gave the log another kick.

"You had to say that now he is dead and can't answer back!"

"But it's true, I can prove it you."

"Don't worry, I don't want to know. I don't believe a word you say, you're a detestable little liar."

Betty looked at Orina straightforwardly. "You know it's true, knew all along, that's why you got engaged to him just so that I couldn't have him. You have always done everything to score off me. We would have got married if you hadn't fixed me up with Bruce."

She paused and Orina stifled a desire to tear her to pieces. She knew most of what Betty had said was lies, probably all lies. If she thought it out it didn't fit in with the facts, perhaps some of it was true, perhaps Dennis had played around with Betty in his madder moments, he was capable of anything, but she doubted it.

She spoke quietly. "I am sorry, Betty, if you don't like me. I can't help that. I think I have always tried to play fair with you, and if I said anything rotten I take it back. I know girls in the family way get all worked up silly, they don't know why, and I shouldn't have spoken to you the way I did. Sorry."

Betty went to the sofa and sat down, she shivered, the aftermath of her recent outburst. Orina smiled at her.

"If I were you I shouldn't do too much hacking. How does Mrs. Whitefoot go for you?"

"Oh, very well. No, I suppose I shouldn't. I don't want to do anything to upset it. It's the only tangible thing anybody has got from him, it's the only thing he has left behind."

Lady Flers walked quietly into the room.

"Were the midges very bad in Scotland? I meant to send you some wonderful stuff for them but couldn't find the address."

"Not unbearable," Orina answered quietly. "Mum, I've rather taken to fishing in my old age. I had a salmon on, a big one, at least fifteen pounds the keeper thought."

"Yes, dear," Lady Flers said, taking out her knitting without listening to what her daughter said. She turned to Betty. "I saw in the papers that nice boy had died—he came and stayed here once for the Hunt Ball, very good-looking and such attractive manners."

"Dennis Pask?" Betty queried.

"Yes, that was it. Pask. You remember him, Orina? I think he was a friend of Malmsey's, or perhaps you weren't here. I am afraid if there's a war the Herrings will be recalled from Valupez. I heard from Kitty the other day. She's coming back and wants to stay with us. I rather hope Cerist does not keep on the idea of cold water in the evening—so awkward apologising to guests. He has a bath in the morning, so it doesn't really matter to him. I think I must insist."

When the men came in Baldy and Orina went to look for a card table in the cold billiard room.

"Give it a rub with the curtain," she suggested, "it's sure to be dusty. Nobody ever dusts the billiard room, only at the Hunt Ball party time."

Baldy dusted obediently.

"I must thank you," he said, "for all you have done for me."

"All I have done for you?" she answered, amused. "Well, I told you the worst, honestly."

"Oh yes," he said, "that's all right." He dusted vigorously, the curtain rings jangling and squeaking. Without looking at her he said, "Betty's quite all right. It worried me, I could never have been happy with all that hanging over me, but now there is to be nothing I am ever so pleased."

Orina laughed, a prolonged titter that rattled round the blank walls and broken pictures, broken by endless wild games of Billiard Fives.

"You go first," she said, "and I'll hold the back of the table."

At the door she stopped, lowering the table to put the light out. Her hand on the switch, she looked back at the chilly apartment, remembering the wild party when Dennis had stayed for the Hunt Ball. She could see him now, running round the table, his vital boyish face, Malmsey shouting instructions. What fun they had had! She wondered again if there was any truth in Betty's story, or if the whole thing was a pack of lies. It would remain always a rough patch at the back of her mind. She would never know, her pride forbade her to mention the subject again.

4

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1ST

ORINA knew every inch of this ride and steadied the mare where a trappy drain crossed the road. The horse skimmed over and across a couple of cattle troughs that had stood all her life memorial statues of the slogan 'We'll fetch them in to-morrow.' Near the farm Orina pulled up. She noticed her sister in a field feeding some ducklings.

"Hullo!" she called over the hedge.

Brounhild looked up and waved the pail she was carrying. "Hullo!"

She came across to the hedge.

"Whose mare is this?" Orina enquired.

The slim, dark child looked at it thoughtfully. "Don't think I know her, probably something to do with Malmsey. What do you think of the ducks?"

Orina looked at them critically while the mare made a sudden bite at the Timothy stack over the hedge.

"Who told you to do that?" she asked the horse. "Don't they give you any hay at home?" Then to her sister, "They're rather an odd collection, aren't they—Aylesbury and Khaki Campbells or Indian Runners—and what in Heaven's name is that?"

"Oh, that's Dopey. She's rather sweet, don't you think? They are a bit mixed, but I got some presents of eggs from different people in the Easter hols. and set them. I thought it would be fun. But when I was at school the foxes got a good many and now I am sick to death of them, it's such a sweat feeding them. I want to sell the lot before I go back—all except Dopey. One couldn't sell her, of course."

"Do you mean because you're fond of her, or because nobody would buy her?"

Her sister did not answer, looking at the curiously coloured and shaped duck. At length she remarked, "Dopey is a character, you know. She can fly a little and waddles and flaps down to the mill pool every night at flighting time."

Orina pulled the mare's head away again from the Timothy stack.

"Orina," her sister asked, "is it true the Germans have invaded Poland? Jim says it was on the wireless at eight o'clock."

"I shouldn't be surprised," Orina answered over her shoulder, "but Jim's usually a jump ahead with the news."

Orina trotted the mare slowly back towards the house. She had been so busy thinking about other things she hadn't worried much about the war scare. If the news were true we would fight. Malmsey had rushed by some back door or bluff into the Territorials. Malmsey was right, then, there would be a war. He had an unfailing knack of doing things at the right moment.

"Father," Orina asked, "you were in the last war, weren't you?"

"Of course," he answered, surprised. "Haven't I ever talked about it?"

"No dear," Lady Flers broke in, "you seemed to forget it at once when you came home. Orina was only tiny—two and a half in 1918. Your father, dear, went all through the war in the Guards——"

"The Brigade," Sir Cerist corrected absently.

His wife paid no attention, but went on proudly, "He was in the South African War, too, joined up as a Tommy when he was only nineteen——"

"Eighteen and a trooper," Sir Cerist corrected again.

"He had the D.S.O., too——"

"M.C.," Sir Cerist broke in. "I never saw such a woman, she never gets anything right—all her family are mad," he added, but without his usual conviction.

"Sorry, Mum, I am late." Brounhild had returned from her ducks. She started hacking the ham with wonted vigour. "Jim says the Poles will wipe the Jerries out, they have loads of cavalry and it rains all the time and their tanks will be no good to them."

"Yes, I am sure," Lady Flers replied. "Orina, is Stephen in anything?"

"Stephen. Yes, of course, Mums, he's always talking about the regiment. He's been out of it some time, but I suppose they will recall him. You know, Stephen should have been a soldier. He loves having lots to do. That's why he's always messing about with companies; he'd like to have regular work, you know, offices and things. Stephen's grandfather invented something like steam or bridges and made lots of money and his great-grandfather lived in a coal pit. They used to pay him a shilling a year to lug up sacks of coal when he was only eight years old. Stephen's very fond of telling that story, it all fits in with his theories about democracy."

Orina paused and Brounhild asked her father, "Why didn't the Flers ever make any money?"

Sir Cerist smiled at her. "If you have land you can grow food on, hay and oats to feed horses, a roof to shelter you—one doesn't want any more. These vast fortunes have ruined this country."

Lady Flers smiled. "I'll remind you of that next time the income tax comes in."

5

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3RD

"I AM speaking to you from the Cabinet Room at Ten Downing Street . . ."

Orina looked round the kitchen. Her father and Jim the groom stood by the window, she noticed Prudence the house-

maid in navy with a prayer book, she was waiting on her way to church to hear the news. They all knew what it was. War. Yes, here he was, telling them, telling millions of similar groups throughout the world. "I have to tell you that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently we are at war with Germany."

Orina saw her mother taking the cook's hands, who had begun to cry. She wished her father had allowed a radio in their part of the house. It was so ghastly, Mums' sentimentality. 'Bad enough to us, but when it gets to cooks! They must think she's a fool.' She noticed Prudence had left the room, and wondered where the wretched evacuee children had got to. Orina had looked after them since their arrival on Friday night. The town-breds were bewildered by the country, but they understood Orina and she them, her knowledge of slumming days had forewarned her to expect the worst. However, the kids had proved clean and biddable, and she had determined to make their stay as much fun as possible.

Prudence returned with her gas mask. Orina smiled at the sight of the cardboard box slung by a string over the girl's shoulder, but in the days that followed she quickly got used to "a Box Brownie" nation. It looked, she often thought, as if everybody was trying to get a personal snapshot of some elusive and unique monster and carried their cameras day and night for fear of missing the slightest opportunity.

The Prime Minister was finishing, his kindly old voice went on, "Now may God bless you and defend the right . . ."

God, Orina thought, Poor God, what a lot He was asked to do. It didn't matter to her, we were obviously right to go and smash up the Germans, they were untrustworthy, a bore, very little sense of humour, and the women unattractive with shiny noses and ill-fitting clothes, moreover they believed in Government control of individuals. No, we would get no rest till they were put back in their place. But why drag poor God into it? Really it seemed hardly fair.

6

LATE SEPTEMBER

It was to Orina as if she had been electrocuted. Up to the time of the Polish Invasion she had a complete life, intertwined by definite threads. Now the whole world had become unreal.

The weeks passed, the evacuees gradually got fed up and "hopped it", her sister Brounhild remained away from school, mostly because it was cheaper. Orina and her mother gave her a scattered education of a moderate degree of accuracy. Baldy and Betty moved out of their house to Twinhampton where Baldy had got the job of R.T.O. Malmsey had a surprising and meteoric career, beginning the war as a 2nd Lieutenant, Territorial Army. With two weeks' service he rose suddenly to be a full lieutenant, while regulars with years of service received no promotion. They heard of him guarding a bridge then as Adjutant of his battalion. They had hardly accustomed themselves to the new change when he became Brigade Intelligence Officer, in which job he seemed to have unlimited petrol and endless leave. For no reason they could fathom or understand he became Staff Captain. Sir Cerist didn't like it, "when," as he said, "hundreds of splendid chaps can't get commissions you wangle yourself into a job you can't possibly be qualified for." Malmsey smiled, the old disarming smile.

"I want to get to France before the war's over," he told them. "The battalion I am in will never get there. Half the boys are under age and the rest are crocks or belong to reserved occupations."

"But Malmsey, it's not fair on your brother officers," Sir Cerist remarked, shaking his head.

Malmsey laughed. "They don't make sense, anyway."

Shortly afterwards he wrote to say he had got to France as an interpreter. "Though," as Orina said, "what he can interpret, God knows!"

Stephen wrote guarded and infrequent letters from the North. He had been recalled to his Territorials before the outbreak of war and now guarded a post he described as secret and about which he would divulge nothing.

Orina was not curious by nature, but she felt Stephen was being a schoolboy about the matter, it was probably some well-known bridge or viaduct. He made no reference in his letters to their parting and she could read no clue between the lines whether he missed her or wanted her. Orina was a good sort and she felt sorry; in her own way tried to make up for it by writing: "I was beastly at the lodge that last day, I was annoyed over losing the salmon and suppose I tried to take it out of you. If you want an A.T.S. or a wife, or anything up there, let me know and I will come up right away." But Stephen merely answered: "You have always been far too nice to me. Don't worry to come up, there is no suitable accommodation." Orina did not mention the matter again.

Sir Cerist messed about all day with his farms and committees. Lady Flers "was so busy I don't know what to do next". This was literally, as Orina knew, the truth. Her mother had no organising ability, she was the perfect example of the slogan 'Muddling through'. She would start looking for the butcher's book in a mass of papers on her marquetry desk, look so long that she forgot what she was looking for, or found the recipe for storing apples she had been searching for on Wednesday. She would take the gardener off his job of autumn clipping the yew, and discuss it with him. Together they would go to the stables to search for straw and consider growing mushrooms in the potting shed. Thus the morning wore on to lunch with nothing done.

Some of the older people, like Orina's mother, recaptured the spirit of the first German war and produced long-forgotten phrases, "It's terrible to see so many people going about not in khaki", or to Orina, "Don't you think, dear, you should do some war work? Everybody must do their bit, you know."

Orina smiled sadly. "Mums, darling, you don't really believe in this war. I know we must beat the Germans, because otherwise they will keep on invading countries, but the whole thing could have been avoided dozens of times. For instance, by showing them when they first went into the Rhineland that we weren't going to have it."

The war dragged on through September. It became a wet rocket. The Allies did little to help the Poles and the Germans

shelled and bombed their towns flat. Orina could see her father was disgusted with the whole thing.

When we raised a storm of abuse over the sinking of the *Athenia* he had said, "If one fights a war every move is legitimate from boiling oil to blockades. If it's war, let's get on with it and not be so tediously hypocritical."

After this outburst he tried to put the war out of his mind and seldom mentioned it.

During the days, however, that Warsaw was being blown to bits and the Russians were calmly taking the remainder of the country, it became too much for him and he started to shout:

"We came into a war to help Poland, and we allow them to be torn to bits before our eyes, and what do we do about it? Send a few boys over to Kiel and nothing more."

"But, Cerist," his wife broke in, "what can we do? They're so far off."

"Do!" Sir Cerist yelled. "We can attack this line of theirs, we can bomb their towns, the same way they are doing to the Poles. We can show them now they are open to attack, now they have their tongues in their cheek, that war doesn't pay."

"But, Cerist, look at all the people who will be killed."

"Good God, woman, if we think that, why the hell go into a war? Nobody asked us to go in."

"Oh, Cerist, you mustn't talk that way."

Orina saw her father smile and going over he patted his wife's shoulder and then suddenly kissed the top of her head. After she had gone happily about her daily muddles he said to Orina:

"A sweet woman, your mother, a Christmas rose."

Orina knew exactly what he meant. Her mother had been lovely as a girl, was still lovely, just like a Christmas rose, apart from other flowers. She lived in a world of the past, a world largely of her own imagination which had never really existed.

7

DECEMBER

ORINA drank her early morning tea. She fanned out the pile of letters on the tray with her left hand. Orina stopped drinking tea and pulled out a letter with an American stamp.

She lay back in bed, holding it with both hands, looking at the writing. At last she opened it carefully.

Lady Fler loved reading letters at breakfast, or passages from them. She had one this morning from her sister at Tieste de Page, such excitements they were having, "But," Lady Flers complained, "she won't tell me anything about them. Me—her sister."

"Quite right," Sir Cerist answered. "If a thing's supposed to be secret, keep it secret, and the only way to keep it secret is to forget it. If the secret is that the Valupians are coming into the war on our side, all I can say is God help our side."

"Kitty should be over here next week. It will be nice to see the dear child, won't it, Orina? Brounhild was very small when she was here before."

"She didn't miss anything," Orina remarked, splitting a sausage.

"Orina, really! You are getting so acid. You must not speak that way before the children."

This was, Orina knew, an age-old formula of her mother's, but she felt cross.

"There's only one child here and she's nearly grown up, unless you mean the Squire."

"Well, I won't tell you any more news. You mustn't speak that way to your mother."

"Oh, sorry, Mums, I've got a splitting head and you know yourself you're not really fond of Kitty."

"Malmsey's got Christmas leave, we'll be quite a large party."

"My old man's coming, too," Orina interjected.

Sir Cerist, following an inner train of thought, remarked, "I think I can persuade Malmsey to leave the Army, they don't really want people now. He'd be much more use here at home, helping about the place."

When eventually Kitty arrived she wondered if she could ask the Longs down to stay. They had come over on the same boat and had, in the way people do on boats, made tremendous friends. Long John had come over to join up and had married suddenly, just before leaving, and brought his wife with him.

Flers had ever open doors to everybody, and the Longs were soon installed. Sir Cerist and Long John got on well, they both had green thumbs, an eye for agriculture. They spent hours wandering round the farms and talking over the stock. Annel, for the most part, sat about the house, complaining that it was very cold.

"Why did you give up your plantation?" Sir Cerist asked Long one muggy December afternoon, as they mutually scratched the thin bristles of Prince Galahad the Second.

"Well," Long considered, "I read all they said in the papers about the Germans invading Poland and Czechoslovakia and how they were grafting these countries, and I thought it just wasn't good enough. We've a lot of Germans over in Valupez, decent chaps, too, in their way, but if they get somebody under them who can't hit back you'd be surprised what they could do to them. So I thought Great Britain and France had done about the best thing they could in saying, 'Right, now this is where you stop.' You see, Sir Cerist, if you really show these Germans they just can't do these things—that's to say, give them the biggest hiding they have ever had in their lives—they'll just turn round and say, 'Why, that's quite right, we can't do it', and they'll get on making musical instruments and drinking beer and be quite happy again. That's the Germans. Just knock the stuffing out of them and they'll go flat as a nigger's bottom."

"I see," Sir Cerist said, "perhaps you're right."

"Anyway, I can steer a 'plane, and that's the way we'll win."

"You think we'll win all right?"

"Win?" Long John laughed. "We'll walk it!"

Sir Cerist looked at Long John thoughtfully. There was something inspiring about his optimism. Was he right? He changed the subject.

"Thought he'd about win the young boar class at the Royal," and with the words the smell of trampled grass and stuffy tents under a scorching July sun came to Sir Cerist and he scratched behind the pink ears with a new tenderness.

Orina took Annel to the cinema at their local town. Both the pictures were second-rate, but Annel loved them and

sang excerpts in the stuffy restaurant where they stopped for tea.

"I hope you don't think it's very rude of me, but why did you marry Mr. Long?"

Annel laughed. "It is good to be married, to haf children, to grow older."

"Yes, but you're so—he's so much—I mean——"

"I sink you are asking these things because there is something of an affinity between us." She gazed deeply at Orina. "You wish to find out something, you do not know what."

"Possibly."

"Then I will tell you. It is quite simple. There are the men you love and the men you marry. Perhaps it is just the man you love and the man you marry, but they are ardly evare the same."

"Yes, I see what you mean," she reflected. "I think you are right."

Annel continued musingly, "When you love someone you find he has all leetle failings, ze weak parts, and you love these, too. But when you marry you pick out one who has not got these weak pieces."

"There must be, then, certain men going about who can only be loved but not married," Orina said, laughing.

As they drove back in the car on the Squire's carefully eked out petrol, she sang 'Throw your luck over your shoulder', and whole floods of memories ran through Orina. She realised that someway just recently she had become older—yes, she had to acknowledge it—more sensible.

Kitty poured out to Brounhild her tragic love-affair with Dennis. Brounhild, being a girl of the acutest intelligence, side-tracked her from telling Orina. She found a photo of Dennis in Malmsey's room and gave it to Kitty.

'I expect,' she thought, her eyes twinkling, 'she'll be the only person true to his memory—as Mummie would say.'

Malmsey arrived the week before Christmas. He was cyclonic. His spirits cheered them up.

A very smart, pretty girl called Pip Popham blew in one

day. "It's lucky she can stay for Christmas," Malmsey broke to them by way of introduction. He called her 'Darling' a lot, but apart from this term of address there did not seem much between them.

He laughed at Sir Cerist's idea of coming home to farm, though admitted France was deadly. However, he had volunteered for Finland and had a good inside string which he averred would pull him out there, skis and all.

He produced also a cloud of young men who dashed in and out like a swarm of khaki bees, and the billiard room rang again with the shouts of Fives players. Neither Annel nor Orina seemed anxious to shine amongst these young men, and Brounhild became quite a centre of attraction.

Orina, watching them playing Billiard Fives one night, realised with a stab they were enjoying themselves just as much, the fun was the same as it had been that night Dennis came to stay for the Hunt Ball. But she had stopped. Cinderella's clock had suddenly struck twelve for her, and everybody else went on enjoying themselves, while she watched like a spectator standing in the dark gazing at brilliant tropical fish in an aquarium.

Returning to the drawing-room she found her mother alone, sitting in a chair doing nothing. It was so unlike her mother for any second of the day to do nothing.

Orina came to her and asked, "What's up, Mugs? Tired?"

"No, dear. I was just sitting thinking."

"What about?" Orina was curious, reflecting, now she came to think of it, what did her mother think about.

Lady Flers smiled very sweetly.

"Oh, about all the other days."

Orina sat down on a low stool beside her mother and held her hand.

"Dear old Mugs," she said. She thought, as she spoke, 'I have always thought about Mums as a child.'

Lady Flers laughed. "You were the most beautiful baby."

"Oh, Mugs, I was horrible."

"Your father worships you, you know."

"The squire? Oh, he'd rather have Prince Galahad the Second."

"I wanted to call you Pamela, it was my mother's name."

"Poor Sweet, why didn't they let you? It's a much nicer name. Orina, Brounhild and Malmsey—they stink of dead Saxons or something."

"They're all sweet to me now, I wouldn't have them changed for anything. Malmsey and you and now little Brounhild—you change so quickly."

A vague feeling of shame crept over Orina. Had she been beastly to this romantic mother of hers? Till this moment she had never given it a thought. Now she wondered.

"I suppose you were lovely as a girl, Mugs?"

"No, I don't think so, dear."

"Did you have young men? I mean, besides Father. I mean——" Orina corrected herself again, becoming quite confused, "admirers, you know, people who wanted to marry you."

Lady Flers smiled at Orina. She wasn't really, inside her modern self, grown up at all.

"It's not so very long ago, dear. Before the War," she corrected herself, "before the last War, I was going to dances."

"It's creeping on for thirty years, Mugs. Mum, you must tell me, did you have anybody special—anybody you were in love with?"

Lady Flers shook her head, smiling at some half-forgotten memory. "I used to pretend to your father, but there wasn't anybody else, ever. He was so wonderful, your father—— Don't do that, dear, it sets my teeth on edge."

Orina was rubbing her legs together so that the silk stockings squeaked.

"Sorry. I used to do it when I was a kid, remember? Mum, do you think there's anything in life—I mean, we just seem to get born and fool about more or less unhappily till we die. There ought to be more than that. I don't know if you'd understand. There seems to be nothing real or worth while. No, you wouldn't understand."

"Orina."

"Yes, Mum?"

"Why do you always think I wouldn't understand? You know I love you, dear. You came too soon, we never thought you were going to live."

"Did I, Mum? Why, nobody's ever told me."

"It's not a very nice thing to talk about, is it, dear?"

"Oh, I don't know. Birth is rather a beautiful thing."

Lady Flers ran her fingers through Orina's new pageboy coiffure.

"You see, there are beautiful things in life."

Orina reflected, 'It's rather soothing to become Victorian with Mugs, and go with her into a world that only exists in her imagination, a safe corner away from the sharp angles, a fairy make-believe of childhood.'

Lady Flers continued stroking her daughter's hair. "Peter," she murmured and felt Orina stiffen. "Where is he now?"

"In America, Mum." And then she added with a smile, "Went there to escape the war."

"How you loved that boy!"

"Mugs, I didn't think you . . ."

"Of course I did, darling. Your face when there wasn't a letter and then you used to go up to your room and cr so terribly. I longed to go to you, say something, but I knew you would be cross with me."

"It's a long time ago, I was only nineteen."

"Yes, dear, but you haven't forgotten him."

"No," Orina answered in a very small voice, "I haven't forgotten him." And she added, suddenly catching her mother's hand, "I didn't know anybody knew anything about it, it was all so hopeless from the start. Did Dad know?"

"Of course not, Rina! He would have been furious." There was a long pause, then Lady Flers asked, "What did you see in him to love so much?"

But Orina didn't answer, instead she remarked, "If I hadn't met him it would have made a hell of a difference."

"Don't use words like that, dear, they're so stable-boyish."

"Sorry."

Lady Flers went on stroking Orina's hair. "You have always wanted too much from life. You see, dear, you have to take the very little things and make them beautiful."

"Yes, Mum. But supposing it had been like you and the

Squire, and we had got married and kids? That would have been beautiful."

The firelight flickered over the pair and the ormolu clock beat peacefully. Orina thought, 'I gave Peter everything, there's nothing left for anybody else.'

Lady Flers broke in on her thoughts.

"You ought to knit some socks for Stephen, dear."

"Yes, Mum."

8

CHRISTMAS EVE, 1939

IT was Christmas Eve, the weather had suddenly, after a few cold snaps, grown mild, a prelude, as it turned out, to a bitter winter.

"It's not like Christmas at all," Stephen said, "we should have snow and robins and that sort of thing."

Sir Cerist looked thoughtfully at the apple logs, watching the scented smoke spiralling from the grey stone hearth.

"It's the sea. A handy thing, the sea—keeps away extremes. With a climate like ours we could be the finest agricultural country in the world," he added sadly.

Orina, standing in the great Tudor fireplace, looked strangely at the two men.

"The sea!" she laughed bitterly. "Warmed by the sea!"

Stephen watched her searchingly.

"Warmed by the blood of brave fishermen," she had added, not looking at them, talking to the fruit logs as if they would understand.

But he knew her meaning. She was thinking of Skipper Higgins and the men of the *Lancashire Lass*, those men who by their stupendous bravery had fought the sea and mastered it, now defenceless, mowed down by swooping planes, the galley smashed with a bomb, the gallant old ship slipping down to Davy Jones by the stern, the Mate encouraging the men as they slipped about on the sloping deck putting the boat out.

"All together, boys, and now one more and she's out!"

They had got the lifeboat deftly into the water. One of

the men slipped a fish basket in to act as a fender, in the casual efficient way they did things.

Stephen, sitting by the warm fire, could recapture the whole tragedy.

The skipper wanted to stay on the boat, and the Mate and men tried to take him off. Skipper Higgins, his black rubber boots awash on the sliding deck, arguing with the Mate, and the remains of the crew in the pitching lifeboat.

"Come on, Skipper, you ain't the bloody boy on the burning deck!"

Stephen smiled as he visualised the Skipper leaning over the tilted rusty bulwarks of the sinking trawler, smiling at the Mate while the two black planes zoomed overhead.

"You know where to put your ruddy poetry. Take that flaming kit box off a cable's length, I'm going back to hear the one o'clock news and see what's happened in the War."

"But Skipper——" the Mate and men had remonstrated.

Higgins' red stubble had shot forward and his dirty white sweater heaved. "You heard! It's a flaming order." Then, over his shoulder as he swished and floundered back to the wireless, he had added, "God bless, boys!"

He had sat there when the boat went down, in the little stuffy cabin where Orina had once slept, calling for help, giving the position of his shipwrecked crew.

Stephen shuddered as he imagined the squeaky voice coming over the air.

"We were just going to pull up the trawl and have a look-see, the men were on deck, when these two great buzzers came along, like white hawks they were, and what if they don't drop a bomb right through the galley. The explosion was that violent it knocked all the tea mugs out of the fenders in the bridge house. Bloody rascals came back and started to play flaming murder with the boys on the fish deck—Charlie and Alf bowled like rabbits. They calls it War—I call it cold-blooded heartless murder. You know now where to pick up the boys. Let the missus know I was remembering her and the kid, and tell Charlie and Alf's folk. Crikey, the old battle-axe is going this time. You could try a shot when you're over here, great class of fish—bloody

cod as big as——" And then he remembered his rescuer was a tramp steamer and so he added sadly, "But I don't suppose you could rig up a trawl on your flaming kettle."

And that was all.

Stephen had picked up all the details he could from the Captain of the tramp and Ronnie, the only survivor, had told him how, after the *Lass* had gone down, the planes had returned and machine-gunned them in the open boat, smashing it to pieces. They had clung to the floating fragments, wounded and frozen in the icy sea. The Mate had kept their spirits up, but was badly hit and after a bit dropped off.

"Got cramp or summat. Just slipped down in the middle of a sentence."

"What was he saying?" Stephen had asked.

"I don't rightly remember. We was arguing abart a girl at Lowestoft he said he knew, and I said he didn't." Ronnie had laughed. "Funny the way things turn out."

Lady Flers had arranged for Orina and Stephen to sleep in Orina's bedroom, and Orina hadn't altered it.

Stephen yawned and Orina went over to him, pulled him out of the chair and took his arm.

"Come on, sweet-pots, we had better get to bed. You've travelled a long way and are dropping with sleep."

They stood in front of the fire arm in arm and Lady Flers watched them intently over her knitting.

"Do you remember that morning when the sun came up over Sandul and they pulled in all those fish?"

"You know I do," Orina answered. "I am the maddening type that can't forget anything."

"Run along to bed, dears," Lady Flers implored. "I am sure Stephen never gets proper sleep in the army."

Sir Cerist stared into the fire. Some inner train of thought or premonition had troubled him and his handsome face looked old and drawn.

"I have reached the stage in life," he told them, "when I must look back all the time because I daren't look forward."

9

DECEMBER, 1940

WHEN the sitz-krieg ceased with the invasion of Norway, Orina joined the war.

"I suppose," she told her father, "I had better do something. The flag seems to be down now."

Like her brother she flitted about from post to post; always trying to get somewhere where something was happening. During the first attacks on London she arrived as a warden in her old slumming quarters. She contacted Joyce again; there was a strange bond between Orina and Joyce neither could understand. Ernie had married the girl when he was released from prison and had started up a small illegal business trafficking coupons and eggs, coupled with fire-watching and looting, but it had not been highly successful as the general trend of public opinion was to assist rather than hinder the mass of laws which flooded the land.

The news of Joyce's death affected Orina a lot; it broke one of the last links with the old days. Ernie and Joyce were toasting a particularly acute raid in their cellar. Ernie had gone to look for another bottle of stout in the kitchenette when he heard 'a real beauty' as he described it, 'like a barrel of bloody marbles with the lid off'. 'The real beauty' proved to be a direct hit. When he had battered his way back to the cellar, he found Joyce pinned by a steel girder which he was unable to move. Joyce wouldn't let him leave her to look for help, and although he shouted nobody came. Showers of incendiaries had lit up the street and two other bombs from the same stick had blocked the entrance, so they just sat there while he held her head higher and higher as the water from the burst main filled the cellar. Neither had said much, they just sat on while the icy water gurgled up round them and they watched the flames through the broken glass of the street light. When Joyce knew it was only a matter of seconds she said, "Kiss me and shove me under."

Ernie stood in Orina's old flat turning his cap round while he recounted the details. Orina gave him a strong Rye High and he told her it was all right.

"Yer gave her a silver costume once, it was good of you." He paused. "She thought a lot of that, talked about it when we was sitting there."

Orina turned away; she had a swelling inside her throat that made it hard to speak. It all started at that dance, she thought, years and years ago. Then Dennis. Now all her friends were dying everywhere or getting broken up. Yet when one listened to the wireless or read the papers it seemed such a safe war, all our aeroplanes were constantly returning safely, and after most raids there seemed few casualties. 'Is it just happening to me and my circle, or is everyone in this?' Orina wondered. But, she reflected, it had gone back before the war—that girl of Dennis's—Babe, and Dennis himself. 'No, I must be in some sort of bad patch.'

Ernie was talking. She had forgotten him. It was Joyce's last message to her.

"But how can I make you go straight?" she asked helplessly.

"She thought you could do anything," Ernie replied.

"Oh God!" Orina answered. "Who am I to advise people?"

Ernie put his cap on.

"Yer don't have to do nothing. I am joining. I am going to give those Jerries bloody hell before I am through with them! I'll burn their eyes out with cigarettes. I'll tear their tongues out and make them swallow them."

Orina watched Ernie as he spoke, his face expressionless, his words coming out crisply and deliberately, and she knew that every word he said he meant. 'Something's got started in the world,' she thought, 'that will take a lot of stopping.'

10

SUMMER, 1941

A SECOND mysterious sit-stillkrieg crept over Britain. Listeners' ears became deadened, all belligerents had stereotyped news phrases; public speakers chased the same adjectives and clichés round and round in narrowing circles; propagandists became tired of military objectives, hospitals and white flags, they realised nobody cared who blew up what

as long as we blew up most. There were so many scraps of paper, violated neutralities and poor little nations we were freeing, their job became tricky in the extreme. Even the complicated code of the Hague Convention became banal. Peace Aims changed to Survival Aims. The country realised they had got into something and it was best to chalk up a V sign and leave it at that.

Flers slept. A wand had been waved over the countryside; gardeners, grooms, most of the indoor servants, had gradually faded away to other occupations. Sir Cerist and Lady Flers carried on. Rank grass grew on the lawn by the river, black winter oats cropped the park but the centuries-old turf had disliked innovations and had replied with an equally strong crop of thistles. It was harder to get about, things were becoming scarce. The artificiality was rolling off the countryside in a great cloud, leaving behind a deep, uncertain calm.

Orina had gone down for a few days to help her mother pack up. Sir Cerist looked magnificent in his Home Guard battle-dress with the double row of medals. Tried to make Sunday lunch a success, but a gloom had settled and Cerist's rather personal jokes fell flat. Orina kept seeing a print that hung in their nursery. 'The Last Day in the Old Home' it was called, depicting the roué father toasting his son in champagne, while his Victorian wife sobbed on Lot 846, and outside she imagined the grooms leading away the remaining hunters and racers.

"The last day in the old home," she said aloud.

Her father frowned at her and turning to his wife:

"It's what we've always wanted, isn't it, Patch? Do you remember how we planned years ago, before the brats came, to live in a cottage by the sea and play on the beach?"

"We'd probably get blown up by mines," Lady Flers answered.

It was so unlike her mother to make cracks or lightning repartee that Orina looked at her closely and was surprised to notice how good-looking she was.

"Stephen and I planned that once on our honeymoon at Le Boc, but he had to have central-heating, speedboats,

silk sheets and caviare for every meal. I got angry." She laughed. "Told him he talked like a dago in a brothel."

"Really, Orina."

"Shut up!" from her father.

After lunch Cerist and Orina walked in the garden.

"So your mother told you the house was to be taken over next week?"

"Yes, Dad, I am helping her to pack some of her treasures."

"A lot of junk," Sir Cerist answered snappily, but the corners of his mouth twitched as some memory flitted across his mind. "She has drawerfuls of muck—bits of the children's hair, a damned bundle of old dance programmes—she's baked as an owl!"

"Yes, Pop, but you're frightfully fond of her."

Sir Cerist didn't answer for a moment, then he said rather helplessly, "What shall I do with Malmsey's things?" He shivered, and Orina knew he saw her brother washing backwards and forwards against the cracking ice fringe of Narvik fiord. She slipped her arm through his. He had suddenly aged and the vital spark had left him. "He has such a lot of stuff—clothes, his purdie guns, photographs, riding things . . . Your mother locked up his room. Orina, I am getting an old man—and what's worse, a blithering old man! I can't go into his room and pack them all up. I told that idiot butler to and he won't, Brounhild's as bad as your mother. You're sensible. Here's the key, get them all packed and send them away somewhere."

Orina didn't answer. They walked through the tangled grass that had once been lawn and stood by the stream.

"Dad, I am tough, I can do most things but somehow—I just couldn't go into that room! It smells of Malmsey. All those groups and cups, you know. He just won hundreds of cups rowing, racing, even tennis."

"Oh, for God's sake, Orina, you're getting as bad as your mother!"

They turned and walked towards their warm red home. It was a very long silence in which they both thought a lot. The Flers could take things big. They passed the old bowling green where Orina had first been kissed by Peter, and Malmsey and she played Red Indians.

"You remember that girl Pip? I saw her at the Suivi the other night. She seemed rather sore. Shall we give the whole room to her? They were engaged or something."

Sir Cerist grunted. "As long as she gets the stuff out before the Light Sussex Tank people take over."

They walked on to the yew garden, still arm in arm.

"I read a book," Sir Cerist told her. "One of these damned novels—*Gone in the Wind.*"

'"With,'" Orina corrected, and added, "It's terrific."

"Hellish long," Sir Cerist mumbled. "But you have read it?"

"Yes."

"Well, we're going rather that way here." He waved his arm, indicating the Tudor chimney, the wistaria-covered walls, the grey Norman tower where the first Flers had lived, the stables, the lime avenue. "Gone in the wind."

'"With,'" Orina corrected again. "Dad, we've had a long innings. Everything has to change."

Cerist looked at her wonderingly. "You—a Flers can say that?" He squared his shoulders. "This family," he told her, "has stuck out civil wars, black death, agricultural famine—and we've ridden over it. We've got the best-looking women for our wives and often we've had nothing better to offer than the shirts we stand up in. I tell you we will never be beat! I am taking over all my land—I'll farm the lot—and you'll carry on after I am dead, plough in my body into our soil for dung, raise crops off it to feed new generations of Flers. We're the only thing in this country that doesn't alter. We represent honour and chivalry, we're the decentest thing that's left because we're the only people who don't stoop to propaganda and lying. We fight hard but we fight clean and nobody's going to beat us and nobody's going to make us lose our honour!" He broke off. Orina looked at him; he was young and active. "Run along to your mother. I talk a lot of nonsense sometimes," he laughed.

Orina and her mother packed for a long time in silence. The sunlight shone through the leaded panes on the emptying room. A very faint drone of bees in the limes came from outside. 'Soon they will be parking tanks on the bowling green

and chalking up V signs on my bedroom wall,' Orina reflected. 'They will have their palliasses and kit arranged round the room and on pay nights they will get drunk and be sick on the floor.'

"I often think of you, dear."

"Same here, Mums."

"You aren't very happy, are you, with Stephen?"

"Oh, we get along all right, Mum—he's a very kindly thing." There was an infinite weariness in Orina's voice when she added, "Does it matter much anyway?"

Lady Flers came over to Orina and the girl suddenly realised for the first time how much her mother loved her.

"If you ever have a little girl, Orina, and she falls in love with somebody, try and see they get married."

Orina laughed. "Fancy you knowing that, Mum," she said incredulously. "I only just found it out myself the other day. I think we will have to go back to keeping girls in cotton-wool—you know like they used to. If one doesn't marry the first time one toughens up so quick the gilt comes off the gingerbread, though whoever put gilt on gingerbread?"

Lady Flers smiled. "It's the white of egg coating that's called gilt—it gives a finish to the cake."

"Mugs, I suppose if you work it out it goes for boys too. If a girl treats a chap rather badly it toughens him up quite a lot."

"You have such a strange way of expressing yourself! You mean, if a girl breaks off an engagement?"

"Well yes, Mums, you could put it like that."

Lady Flers paused and looked searchingly at her daughter, then she added, "It's a dreadful thing to do, dear. A woman should always influence a man for good."

'Most of what Mugs says is rubbish,' Orina thought, 'but I think she's got something somewhere.'

11

AUTUMN, 1941

ANNEL and Long John walked up and down the tiresome room they had managed to take near the aerodrome.

"For the hundredth time, sweetness, I will not take this job in Valupez. It's a lousy country with lousy people and although I speak their blasted language, I wish to hell I didn't and that I had never seen the place."

Annel ran her fingers slowly through her alluring hair without replying and Long looked at the woman who was so glamorous that his brother officers declared "She's not true, anyway."

"It is because I like you so much, you haf been so good to me." She paused and then added cryptically, "I wish to help you."

"Help me!—by dragging me back to a white blazing hell when I've come over to fight for my blasted country."

"Your country." Annel smiled. "You fight for it last war —this war—every war you fight for this freedom, this democrats, this—this—but what they do for you?" She paused and then added, "These little boys in their kites dropping eggs on people they haf nevare seen——"

"Shut up, you bitch!" Long shouted at her. "You can only think about yourself, you haven't one decent feeling in that lovely body of yours."

Annel lit a cigarette from a paper match held in a much-worn metal holder.

"Men," she laughed, "they think this, they think that, and they haf what they want right in their hands, stuck up before their noses—the gold of life, ze flowers of life—and they walk straight past it." She stopped suddenly as if she had stepped on to a 1,000-volt cable. Her face paled under the glowing hazel. "It's too late," she murmured brokenly and quietly and her hand holding the cigarette shook the ash. "It's too late," she said again very slowly, distinctly and with such sadness that Long ceased pacing and came over to look at her.

"What's too late? Lunch," he added as an afterthought.

Annel looked straight before her, through her husband, through the wall, into eternity itself.

"Don't look that way, saccharine. I can't bear it when you go all voodoo. Snap out of it!"

Annel spoke, deadly, her voice coming from somewhere back of her. It made John shiver.

"Everything's burning—you're coming down—a great torch from heaven——"

Long watched her fixedly, then he came over and slapped her face. "Get out of it!"

Annel came back again, but her face was still a mask. The telephone bell rang drillingly from the passage outside.

"Oh, hell!"

Annel stood rigid and pale while he answered it.

". . . Very good, sir. I'll be over in five minutes."

He returned to the room.

"It's a job," he remarked casually. "Where's my belt?"

"You have it on."

"Thanks. Did you manage to get any cigarettes at the shop?"

"Of course not," Annel answered languidly, "they haf been sold out for days."

"Oh, well . . . but I don't like robbing the mess all the time."

"Silly! I get them." She pulled open a drawer and handed him several packets of 'Lucky Strike'.

"Where the hell?—when there are none in England——"

Annel shrugged, dismissing the matter as of no account.

"I get them, that's all that matters."

"Well, thanks, and cheerio. But I am not going to Valupez—maybe after the war."

"No," Annel smiled pathetically, "you will never go to Valupez. You silly, silly men—all on your own—bloody clevare. You can do this, you can do zat, you are so wonderful, so brave. You protect women, you love them, you fight for them!" She laughed bitterly and turning her back on him walked to the window from where through the trees the great silver birds were already starting to roar, their voices throbbing in an anthem to the thin, blue sky. Long paused at the doorway, then came back and, walking over, turned her towards him.

"You're a great sweet really," he said. "I got you wrong once, all wrong, but you have been super-wonderful to me. You're the top—you're wizard—a good type."

Annel smiled, that face-transforming smile of tropic nights, moon over the lagoon and hibiscus with the scent of jasmine.

"My silly old man." She ran her fingers through his hair. "Kiss me!" she ordered, and they kissed on the mouth—her scarlet mouth—and all the sun of Valupez was in that kiss. "Don't go," she pleaded, "stay here with me."

"Silly, I must go."

"Listen, I haf it all planned." She slipped her arm round him and the touch made April to John. "You don't worry about your old planes. I will ring up the airero station—you are ill, see. There is someone I know who will help keep them out of the house for two, mayhap three day. I haf gasoline—"

"Petrol!" he said in astonishment.

She rushed on, her eyes radiating her exotic beauty. "I also have a dress for you—what you call civvies—and two make-up registration card. We can get through by night. Captain Alfredo of *Laz Pepine* is here, he knows of my plan, he will hide us. Once in Valupez we are safe."

"Are you crazy?" Long shouted. "I am in the Air Force! Are you mad? I am British."

"You can't help that," she answered reassuringly, and then passionately, "I know I am a seller-bitch, I do not even love you, but I look after my man."

Long stood back, holding her at arm's length.

"A lot of men would have killed you for this—turned you over to the cops. But I know what it's like out in Valup and what you're doing, according to your standard, is big, and I shan't forget it."

Annel looked piercingly at him.

"You're not coming back this time, do you know that?"

Long shrugged. "It's daylight and tricky, but I'll make it."

Annel smiled and walked over to the fireplace for another cigarette.

"If you love me, you'll do what I say."

"I do love you, you know that, but you don't love me—you love that bum schoolboy who your father bumped off."

"I shall always love him," Annel said simply, "but I will make you happy. If you go now," she spoke deliberately, "I swear by the Holy Cross I will nevare speak to you again."

She had played the last card in her hand and Long waited at the door, while Annel watched him wistfully. But he

didn't hesitate, she knew he wouldn't, slung his greasy respirator with the worn helmet on the back. He paused a fraction of a second at the doorway.

"Call me 'cara'," he asked, looking at the floor, but she didn't answer.

Long smiled wistfully.

"It seems a funny thing to say about a double-crossing bastard dago like you, but you're the straightest person I have ever met."

She looked at him hopefully. "Then stay, let me look after you."

But Long, still smiling, straightened himself.

"Cheerio, Sweetie-Pie," he called, and added, seeing her face, "Always merry and bright."

The evening came and the fixed beams of searchlights shone out through the trees, welcoming bands of vivid blue piercing the night. Annel stood by the window looking out, the room dark behind her, as once before she had watched on the foothills of the Red Mountains.

The planes—some of the planes—returned: their navigation lights shone like Valupian fireflies, the roar of their engines zooming through the window of that quiet room. Ambulances ran about on the landing-field; the grey shapes stood, misty leviathans; some had streamers of telephone wire hanging from them, while others were furrowed by stripes of machine-gun fire. Annel, her arms crossed, stared out, seeing nothing, till the last searchlight was out. Then she went to the hall and lifted the receiver. Long John hadn't come back.

Annel stood by the fireplace again smoking in the dark. A long time she stood there. The sirens wailed: a few desultory Jerries were coming over to raid the drome. The off and on purr of their engines came from high up. A stick of bombs fell, silver streaks, straggling a field nearby. The leaden thuds shook the room. Annel put her head out of the window.

"Here I am," she called into the sky, "come and get me."

But the planes were racing for home with night fighters after them.

She walked up and down for some time and then switched

on the light. Her eyes wandered hopelessly round: every where John's things struck at her; his blackened pipe, one tennis shoe and his brand new steel-shafted clubs. The telephone dithered in the passage. Annel stood listening to it, her heart-beats quickened and a tingling, breath-shaking sensation flowed through her. With difficulty she reached the instrument, her hand was moist on the polished bakelite.

"What you say? Who is it? . . . Warden. Yes, I understand." She still held on limply. "I hear . . . my light is showing . . . Yes, I will."

"Good night," the voice squeaked.

"Good night," Annel answered automatically.

As she opened the door of their living-room her accustomed fire came back, and singing, 'Throw your luck over your shoulder' she took Long's mashie and smashed the globe.

12

POSITIVELY THE LAST CHAPTER

ORINA looked at her watch, then at the street door on her left. No one came in; she scanned the talking groups, itched to get up and walk round to the other entrance of the Garth, but she had done that twenty minutes before and couldn't do it again.

'It makes me look like a tart sitting here alone, I wonder if there is anybody I could talk to.' She looked round. A bunchy girl in V.A.D. uniform caught her eye. She kept meeting her at intervals. Dorothy something.

She thought suddenly: Dennis tearing up a letter, Ernie going into the kitchenette for a bottle of stout, not palming Dorothy 'what-is-it' off on Baldy at that Hunt Ball . . . Small sparks to start big fires.

A waiter she knew hovered distantly. He couldn't understand the position: Mrs. Whyte ditched and taking it lying down. He saw out of the corner of his eye that she was looking at herself again in her mirror. It must be somebody very special; she did look a smasher, breathing out glamour; perhaps it was Mr. Whyte? That was good, he always swelled the tronk.

She knew before the door swung it was him. Peter came straight for her. Orina quivered all over.

"Why the costume?"

Lord Peter laughed. "God, it's good to see you again."

"I didn't know A.B.s were allowed in here," she answered, just for something to cut the strain.

"We live in a democratic world, sweetheart. I've merely found my level."

"Till I got your wire yesterday I thought you were in America. You wrote me, remember, saying you'd gone there to avoid the war."

"You've improved a lot in looks since we used to——" He broke off. "What's happened to the old bowling green? Pushing up wheat, if I know your father."

"Peter, somebody told me you were on the films."

"They move in a strange way, the Americans, their wonders to perform. They paid me a salary to keep somebody else quiet. My principal job was preventing two Borzios from running about on the set. Have a drink?"

Orina shook her head. "I've chucked it; during the early part of the blitz I tried to drown things, got scared."

"All right." Peter smiled and Orina smiled, too. "We'll have a couple of double tomato juices."

While the waiter fetched them they looked at each other. Somehow they forgot to speak. Peter shook himself.

"I meant to write about Malmsey——"

"Don't!" Orina said sharply.

"I sleep in a hammock and scrub the decks. I am Able-bodied Seaman Smith. I thought it would be simpler that way. Snookey and I picked up two girls at a palais-de-dance last time ashore. My one quoted Shakespeare and disagrees with Einstein's theory. The lower deck isn't what you would expect . . ."

They ate their dinner in a dream, without caring what they ate. There were gold fish in the *hors d'œuvre* and afterwards goat. Peter did remark over the goat. "I bet when we're reduced to rats the Garth chef will make them taste heaven." About coffee time, Peter clinked his iced water against Orina's.

"To the only girl I have ever cared about, the girl I dream about now."

Orina could have said lots of things. If he was speaking the truth, why had he left her so often, humiliated her so much? But she wanted it to be the truth and said nothing, smiling, her lips provocative, eyes gleaming. They both glowed as lovers do.

"I've got seven days' leave," Peter told her.

Orina knew it was coming to the point, the parting of the ways where she would have to make an irrevocable decision and she didn't know what to decide. She stalled him sweetly by raking out the past that she thought of so often.

"Do you remember the yacht Goodwood week?"

"Heavens, yes," Peter answered, but it brought in Malmsey, so he countered by asking, "What about Le Touquet?"

Orina remembered in a flash. She was back in the hotel bedroom waiting for Peter. She recaptured the thrill when the door imperceptibly opened and he slid in. Peter knew what she thought.

"Then there was the night when we made all that money ——" Peter broke off. "You know why I wired you, Splodge?"

'Splodge,' Orina thought. 'Nobody else has ever called me that.' Yes, she knew why he had wired her.

She straightened herself, her face became serious.

"Peter, I can't go on that way. Darling, you don't know how miserable I've been. You see," she said simply, "you mean everything in the world to me. I can never get you out of my mind. I thought I had forgotten you once, but oh, ages ago, at Ally Park somebody mentioned your name and I was miserable for weeks. Then before your wire came I had got you out of my system. Don't you see. I can't go on that way, it kills me."

Peter put his hand in her bag, took out the cigarette case and lit a cigarette.

"You think I've been a cad, you think it was all lies, that I never loved you? But you're wrong, Splodge, terribly wrong. I have always loved you, but I've always been in such a financial mess, so broke, so much in debt, I just couldn't ask you to share the broker's men with me. Now it's all different."

He paused. "Do you know, I was on my last card in America? Playing gigolo, a kept man. I am so soft, always take the easy road. But suddenly a little Jewish producer said to me, "If I had a country like yours and a name like yours, I wouldn't drag them through the sewers of Hollywood." I tell you it woke me up. That's why I came back. When I got decent everything went right for me. My father has started my allowance up. I'm independent again. What's more, I'm a man. Orina, I don't just want to sleep with you. I want you always, for my wife. I want to make up for all that's gone. I have a photo of you in my kitbag. Snookey asked me who it was and I told him, 'It's my girl.' That's what I mean."

They sat still in silence, the band was playing, they could have danced. Orina felt very cold. She had prayed for this moment for years and it had come too late—or had it? Stephen didn't care much for her—or did he? Perhaps it was only a line of Peter's. She knew one thing for certain: she, Orina, loved this man more than life itself.

"Don't cry, darling."

"I'm not crying—not exactly."

Peter smiled. "But pretty close."

"Peter," Orina said, and she clenched her hands. "I'm all strung up." She hesitated before she spoke, drinking in Peter and all he stood for, then fortified herself. "Peter dear, girls who are going to have babies do get very strung up, don't they?"

Peter sat watching Orina for a long time. He had the power of reading her straight through. At length he smiled, squeezed her hand.

"You win," he said rather drearily.

YOU CAN READ THIS LAST

THERE are people who show photographs of their children to strangers in railway carriages, people who eat ices in cinemas, and people who want to know what happened to the others in books. SO:

Annel got two proposals within a month: she told the men to go to hell (she was that sort of girl).

It is not known what happened to Long John; as he hasn't come back, maybe he's knocking about somewhere.

Orina and Stephen lived on.

Mrs. Pask doesn't get many patients in her hospital, but she does look smart in her uniform.

Kitty Herring married a man called Lionel something in the Ack-Ack, but he had been in the Diplomatic before the war, and my! the family *were* pleased!

Lady Flers put Malmsey away in her mind, wrapped in lavender. "We must just carry on," she tells people, "until we have won and can start making a future for our grandchildren." As Orina once said, "Maybe she's got something."